

**REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE SEXUAL DESIRE
IN FOUR NOVELS BY WOMEN FROM THE
EIGHTEENTH AND
NINETEENTH CENTURIES**

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Master of Arts by Research

2013
UNIVERSITY OF BEDFORDSHIRE

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**by
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A thesis submitted to the University of Bedfordshire, in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters by Research

October 2013

Abstract

This thesis discusses the way in which female sexual desire is represented in four novels written by women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It analyses the protagonists' wish for sexual fulfilment and emancipation and explores the extent to which these novels may be regarded as proto-feminist. Drawing primarily upon the theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Toril Moi, and Sigmund Freud, the thesis will examine *Fantomina* (1725) by Eliza Haywood, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) by Mary Hays, *Aurora Floyd* (1863) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin. It argues that each text offers an exposé of the power of the patriarchal social order which seeks to define and dominate a woman's capacity for sexual desire. The findings show that each of the female protagonists may be seen as a strong and fearless heroine, but each one may also be seen as a victim of an oppressive patriarchy. The study concludes that although positive and negative elements co-exist within these novels, by interrogating their different representations of female sexual desire it is possible to acquire a more nuanced understanding of the texts and their contribution to the liberation of women.

Key words: female sexual desire, women, eighteenth century, nineteenth century, novels, patriarchy, proto-feminist, autonomy, emancipation.

For Lorena;

Mia figlia, mia famiglia, mia vita, mia felicità

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Masters by Research at the University of Bedfordshire.

It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

Name of candidate:

Signature:

Date:

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Acknowledgements

This research project would not have been possible without the help of the following:

The University of Bedfordshire, for awarding me the Diamond Jubilee Scholarship. Many thanks.

My supervisors, Doctor Nicola Darwood and Professor Bob Owens, for their expert knowledge and guidance.

My undergraduate lecturer Doctor Clare Walsh for introducing me to the wonderful world of gender studies and feminism.

My colleague Laura Ferguson, for her support and advice during this research project.

It is to my family that I owe my greatest debt. My parents, Rosa Maria Simoes Lopes Castellano and Gioacchino Castellano. Without their unconditional love and unwavering support I would never *ever* have been able to start or complete this. I thank them for their unreserved faith in my ability and constant encouragement, for their unfailing reliability, even at the eleventh hour. I don't think I will ever deserve them. *Papá e mamma, vi ringrazio dal cuore.*

My sisters and best friends, Mirella Castellano-Persaud, and Angela Castellano, for their love, continued support and constant understanding. For helping to keep my feet firmly on the ground, and inspiring me through their own creativity and determination, I thank them both.

My brother-in-law, Rob Persaud, for his refreshing ideas and encouragement. I am grateful for the love and support.

Last but certainly not least, I thank my six year old daughter Lorena, who is the reason I breathe. For her love and patience during this period, and for understanding my purpose without ever grumbling. For inspiring me and making me smile every day, I am so very proud and eternally grateful.

List of Abbreviations

Throughout the thesis, page references to the texts under discussion are keyed to the following editions:

- F* Eliza Haywood, *Fantomina* (1725), in P. R. Backscheider and J. J. Richetti (eds.) *Popular Fiction by Women 1660–1730* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)
- MEC* Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), ed. E. Ty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)
- AF* Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Aurora Floyd* (1863), ed. P. D. Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
- A* Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899), in *The Awakening and Other Stories*, ed. P. Knights (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

Introduction

This thesis will examine four novels by women writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and their representation of female sexual desire. The texts to be analysed are Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina* (1725), Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1863) and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). How sexual desire is represented in fiction plays an important role in trying to understand the complex issues surrounding female oppression and the ways in which women have struggled to achieve greater overall liberation. In recent years there has been an increased interest in novels written by women of the pre-feminist period in an attempt to resurrect forgotten female authors and analyse the significance of the issues these authors address. Despite this, I am not aware of any other work that examines these four particular texts together, and which focuses on the theme of female sexual desire in the same way that I do.

Most of the current research on these novels is contentious in that there is no overall agreement about the meaning of each of the heroines' sexual desire in relation to the wider context of attempts to achieve female autonomy. For example, some critics argue that the texts do not emancipate women sexually or otherwise since the displacement of female identity, owing to the choices of each heroine, compromises the autonomy and agency of the heroine (for example see Abassi, 2012: 39; Spangler, 1970: 250; Ramos, 2010: 146, Bloom, 2007: 1). Others praise the texts for the ways in which the female protagonists subvert the traditional expectations of female comportment and sexual behaviour, and in so doing, challenge patriarchal society, and gain a measure of emancipation (for example see Croskery, 2000: 69; Bergmann, 2011: 2; Robinson, 2011: 162, Griffin-Wolff, 2000: 385).

My rationale for choosing these particular four novels is that there appear to be common themes, as well as areas of difference within the texts that link them together and make them worthy of scholarly examination. To begin with, each text contains explicit and implicit references to women's sexual desires, yet

they all differ slightly in their portrayal of these. Each of the heroines is a strong, brave individual who challenges the conventional order, but their identities also seem to subscribe to what can be considered male constructed archetypes of women, which the author appears to satirize or condemn. For example, these novels in turn include a coquette, an intensely passionate woman, a femme fatale and an adulteress, all of whom are associated with sexual transgression. Each text highlights what is at stake for a woman in relation to the expression of her sexual desire during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What is more, each protagonist seems to adopt mannerisms that are usually associated with men, such as aggression, boldness and vigour.

Additionally, each heroine corresponds to a prescribed stage in a woman's life. *Fantomina* is an adolescent; *Emma Courtney* is a young unmarried woman; *Aurora Floyd* is a wife; and *Edna Pontellier* is a mother. Each novel calls into question the vices and virtues generally associated with the stage depicted: the manner in which a young girl's sexual desires are fulfilled, the lengths a woman might go to for love, the risks involved in suppressing a woman's thoughts and erotic feelings, and whether or not motherhood is the summit of female happiness. Furthermore, each of the novels uses the trope of romance as a basis for the story and each heroine seems to be endowed with rather a quixotic imagination and idealistic notions about love, regardless of their ages. Each text represents a particular literary sub-genre. *Fantomina* is an early seduction novel, also known as amatory fiction; *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* exemplifies the novel of sensibility; *Aurora Floyd* is a sensation novel; and *The Awakening* is an American example of New Woman fiction. On publication, each text was attacked for its shocking content and was seen as defying the boundaries of literary conventions deemed appropriate for women. Novels which challenged conventional styles were considered scandalous but interestingly, as we shall see, ideas of what was permitted in terms of custom and attitudes towards sexual desire and autonomy in novels changed markedly over the course of the two centuries.

Another point which links these texts together, is that each of the writers themselves were criticized either for their texts, for their private lives or both. Each author subverted the existing moral code of 'proper' womanly behaviour. Modern readers of these novels may be perplexed however as they struggle to discern what the authorial motive is, and whether these novels liberate or restrain their heroines. On one hand, the novels portray subversive heroines who push against conventional boundaries and they can therefore be perceived as proto-feminist. At the same time, the novels may appear to be unsuccessful in their attempts to show how women might achieve greater freedom, or, their grasp of the reasons why women are oppressed may seem limited. The novels' endings seem to suggest that the heroines ultimately conform to the demands of social convention. Each heroine seems transgressive and tenacious, but Fantomina is sent to a nunnery, Emma Courtney becomes a widow and a single mother, Aurora Floyd gets married and Edna Pontellier apparently dies. How can the same text invite such paradoxical readings? Does the fact that a text was written by or for a woman mean that it is a 'feminist' text?

In this thesis I will investigate the various complex layers that exist in each text. I hope to offer a means to understand the novels in a more nuanced manner, acknowledging the difficulty of the issues they draw attention to. The argument will be that although the historical and familial circumstances vary for each heroine, there is nonetheless a similar yearning for autonomy and sexual fulfilment in each of them and, in pursuing their desires, each heroine transgresses beyond their expected gender role to gain autonomy. Looked at in this way, the sexual defiance of each protagonist can be understood to be emancipating even though she seems at the end to be re-subjected to the dominant forces of patriarchal control. While sexual desire manifests itself in different ways in these novels, the authors present female readers with an opportunity to contemplate their own desires for independence and erotic pleasure, and the extent to which these may be seen as identical to those of the heroine. The actions of the heroines invite the female reader to explore an alternative mode of being: an escapism of sorts.

Written in a period before the emergence of the term ‘feminism’, these authors seem nevertheless to explore concepts that have been presented in abstract theoretical terms by more recent feminist scholars. Their narratives may be seen as literary assaults upon the social order which feminists have shown, dictate the standards for women’s lives. For example, Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* confronts the boredom and discontent which sometimes engulfs housewives and mothers, a concept that Betty Friedan tackles in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), over sixty years later. *Aurora Floyd* engages with the portrayal of women as the marginalized Other through male-constructed images, which results in a woman’s inferior identity and voice, a subject that lies at the heart of Simone de Beauvoir’s text, *The Second Sex* (1949). *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* explores the eighteenth-century image of the humble, passive female in connection with gender relations and conflict, a topic that Jean Baker-Miller examines in her 1976 book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. The eponymous heroine of *Fantomina* explores her erotic strength as a form of sexual empowerment, a topic Audre Lorde addresses in her paper ‘Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power’ (1978).

Examining these texts together also highlights a repeated contradiction in all four texts, in that they are decidedly subversive but at the same time, in many ways conventional. I would argue that this pattern is somewhat inevitable in women’s writing throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as it would have been difficult for many woman writers to put forward an entirely positive and explicit representation of female sexual desire before the twentieth century. Authors from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cannot be condemned for a failure to have represented the full implications of a demand for complete sexual equality between men and women. By reading each novel through a lens of feminist theory, and, where appropriate, a psychoanalytic perspective, I show that the heroines of these novels can, at the same time, be considered proto-feminists in their relentless pursuit of freedom from patriarchal tyranny, *and* as victims of an inescapable male-dominated culture. As Lynn Pykett points out, many older texts are read from our own ‘limited [...] political and sexual standards’ which may explain one of the reasons why texts may seem defeatist to some readers (Pykett, 1992: 50). To appreciate the circumstances of the text and author, she

argues that it is necessary to take account of the novel's historical and cultural context as often, the texts 'rework and negotiate, as well as simply reproduce, the contradictions of those conditions' (ibid.).

The thesis draws from the work of previous feminist scholars and theorists who argue that some women writers of the pre-feminist period preferred to conform, or end their narratives conventionally, so that they could, paradoxically, progress in society. For instance, it may be possible to consider the pseudo-conformist endings of each of these texts as a deliberate move in order for the authors themselves to acquire a measure of personal and public autonomy. Ros Ballaster claims, for example, that the woman writer became a 'prostitute of the pen' and chose intentionally to comply with the system rather than defy it since this compliance afforded female writers more autonomy and productivity (1992: 29). Jean Stockard and Miriam Johnson argue that the patriarchal social order leaves women no choice but to 'play the game [in order] to survive' (1980: 17). A further example is Jean Baker-Miller's contention that subordinate groups may employ tactics which are intended to gratify and 'accommodate' the governing group, but which are merely acts of 'hidden defiance and "put ons"' (Miller, 1991: 10). These assessments offer some justification for a re-evaluation of the novels and their apparent contradictions, since the texts have evoked such mixed reactions.

Central to my thesis is the work of Simone de Beauvoir, in particular, her influential text *The Second Sex* (1983). Although aspects of this text may be considered out-dated, de Beauvoir's famous aphorism that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (ibid: 295) is most apposite as it recognizes the acculturation of women's identity throughout history as a male invention (Baker, 1989: 163). She argues that 'humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being...He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other' (de Beauvoir, 1983: 16).

De Beauvoir reveals women's historical importance as a negation, or a lack in comparison to men, the subject by which all identity is established. Her existential stance on what it means to be a woman in relation to a man is highly relevant to this thesis. Each of the heroines in the texts questions what is expected of her with regard to her circumscribed roles and duties as a woman and each is undoubtedly marginalized as the Other. De Beauvoir's work explicitly taps into the female psyche, and helps to identify and make clear the complexities of what is at stake for each of the heroines.

Judith Butler's work on gender and performance is also crucial to my thesis since it can be argued that the heroines of the four texts fluctuate between the boundaries of institutionalized gender definitions and at times also assume a 'masculine' manner. In *Gender Trouble* (1999), Butler argues that the constructed definitions of masculinity and femininity are problematic because ultimately, the notion of gender is a myth. According to her, gender is a façade, generated and arranged by sex and sexuality through performative acts of repetition, regulated and maintained by the hegemonic order through 'coherence' and 'continuity' (1999: 33, 180, 23). She argues that female identity is subject to change so it is impossible to designate gender labels, yet the social order continues to create and necessitate labels to represent the frontiers 'of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system' (ibid: 43, 30). In short, placing genders in definite boxes is limiting as it abandons and ignores the possibility of any fluidity between them.

Also significant to my research is the work of Toril Moi and her ideas on female marginality. Drawing from the feminist theories of Julia Kristeva, Moi argues that when women are excluded from the prevailing social order, they tend to occupy a position of marginality. Due to their existence on this periphery, women are not accepted within conventional society and inevitably fuse with the chaos of the culture outside. Their displacement and designation to the outer edges of society has sometimes enabled men to label women, Moi argues, as threatening and unruly symbols, as either 'Lilith or the whore of Babylon' or in contrast, to worship women as 'Virgins and Mothers of God' (1985: 167).

Moi's concept is relevant to my work as I believe that the heroines' insubordinate nature and rejection of prevailing feminine definitions lead to her designation as a figure of marginality.

Finally, the thesis draws from aspects of Sigmund Freud's psycho-sexual theories. Freud's theories aid an exploration of particular aspects of these narratives by offering a viewpoint about their possible meanings and implications. He argues that when a girl realizes she has no phallus, her desire to obtain one becomes a lifelong quest which results in 'penis envy' (1961: 229-230). This idea is connected to the 'masculinity complex' by which the young girl refuses to recognize an 'organic inferiority' and amplifies her 'previous masculinity', seeking protection through an 'identification with her phallic mother or her father' (1961: 232, 1986: 428). Since all the heroines seem to embrace assertive and aggressive roles which are typically associated with men, Freud's theories cannot be ignored.

The overall aim of this thesis is to contribute towards a broader understanding of the representation of women's libidinous desire in literature and how this may be interpreted. The thesis has been constructed as a series of four linked chapters, one devoted to each novel. Because some of the novels are not well known, each chapter begins by providing a brief biographical sketch of the author, and a synopsis of the novel. Each chapter will examine the ways in which the heroine of each novel can be seen as transgressive, and will also explore the extent to which each heroine appears to conform to or regress into conventional ideologies of womanhood. The argument is that these heroines may be seen as both progressive and regressive in the way they negotiate a space for female autonomy and that all four novels offer the possibility of a positive conclusion, while appearing to conform. I argue that each authors' somewhat ambiguous surrender of her heroine may have been quite deliberate.

Chapter One examines how the eponymous heroine of *Fantomina* employs the trope of disguise and masquerade to repeatedly lure her lover. It argues that the protagonist is able to exercise some agency through her sexual power when she is in disguise. Femininity and masquerade are both used by women to advance

themselves. At the same time, however, masquerade can also have a negative effect, leading the masquerader back into patriarchal paradigms. This chapter ends by arguing that Fantomina's eventual banishment to a nunnery may not be as negative an outcome as some critics have suggested and that there were many positive aspects of such female-centred establishments.

Chapter Two explores the theme of infatuation and unrequited love in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* through Emma's relentless pursuit of Augustus Harley. The pursuit of her beloved in this manner can be interpreted as a transgressive and autonomous act. The chapter considers the darker implications of Emma's situation through a psychological lens, by examining her childhood and romantic expectations in relation to her obsession. It argues that the conclusion of the novel need not necessarily be read pessimistically, in the light of the legal and social benefits of widowhood.

Chapter Three turns to *Aurora Floyd* and examines the angel/demon dichotomy that pervaded the nineteenth century, to illuminate Aurora's apparent character, her position as a marginalized Other in society and the absurdity of this contradiction. The Victorian ideology of femininity and domesticity meant that women were excluded from all other activities and expected to uphold an impossible ideology of purity and morality. Arguably Aurora gains autonomy by violating the myth of the feminine ideal in refusing to adhere to social expectations of femininity. However there are clearly regressive aspects of Aurora's story in terms of her silenced voice and constructed identity as both an angel and demon. The conclusion of the novel, in which Aurora renounces her more masculine pursuits for legitimate marriage and motherhood, also highlights the endlessly shifting boundary line between respectable and disgraceful status for women. The chapter argues however, that Aurora uses patriarchal marriage to her advantage.

Chapter Four considers the way in which Edna from *The Awakening* empowers herself through a spiritual and physical awakening. She gains personal autonomy from her husband and children by rejecting the demands of institutionalized motherhood and by asserting her own identity through her newly

awakened sexuality. However her excessively romantic imagination and idealistic notions of love essentially leave Edna trapped by the patriarchal order. While the conclusion may not be a show of radical proto-feminism in relation to the rest of the novel, it can still be read as emancipating in its historical framework. Edna's suicide can be seen as a rebirth or reversion to the mother's womb through the death instinct and therefore an act of liberation.

Chapter One

‘Skilled in the Art of Feigning’: Masquerade and Erotic Power in Eliza Haywood’s *Fantomina* (1725)

Taught from their infancy that beauty is a woman’s sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison. (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1992: 90)

Eliza Haywood was one of the most ‘openly and viciously attacked’ writers of ‘amatory’ fiction, an ‘explicitly erotic’ genre written by and for women during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries which concentrated ‘on the representation of sentimental love’ (Saxton, 2000: 4, Ballaster, 1992: 31). Despite this notoriety, very little is known about Haywood. She was born in London around 1693, and seems indeed to have led quite a scandalous life. She gave birth to two illegitimate children, by different men, had walked away from her marriage by 1717 and pursued an exciting stage career (Schofield, 1990: 44). The author of over sixty literary works, she earned the epithet ‘The Great Arbitress of Passion’ (Ballaster, 1992: 158). She died in 1756.

Many of her early works have been described as ‘semi-pornographic’ (Schofield: 1990: 44), but her first novel, *Love in Excess; or, The Fatal Enquiry* (1719) was one of the three most celebrated pieces of fiction at the time, along with Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). It was a best seller until 1740 when Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* was published, after which amatory fiction began its decline, preparing the way for sentimental fiction (Saxton, 2000: 2). Haywood also wrote and published the first ever woman’s journal, *The Female Spectator*, which ran from 1744 to 1746 and was extremely popular. It dealt with a range of women’s issues such as adulterous husbands, the education of girls, tea drinking, jealousy and female decorum (Spacks, 1999: xv). Haywood was keenly aware of the patriarchal system she belonged to, and was conscious of using her writing as a conduit for edification of her female readers, particularly in relation to matters of the heart,

body and social circumstance. In *The Female Spectator* for example, she discusses men's objection to women's education, stating that the arguments put forward by men are 'weak' and 'unjust' (ibid.: 134). Haywood admits that her musings may be considered fanciful and inappropriate to some, who think her role is merely to 'report' and not 'present [readers] with Ideas of [her] own Formation' (ibid.: 138). However, she argues that while she may not 'flatter' herself into thinking that any of her ideas may influence readers, especially since those who might agree with her would be too 'asham'd to confess it', she does believe that with perseverance and tenacity, there is potential for change; that the 'Impossibility lies only in the *Will*' (ibid.). Undoubtedly, Haywood uses her authorial advantage to critique masculine society and enlighten her audience for 'pedagogic ends' (Lubey, 2006: 310)

Fantomina begins at the theatre, where a beautiful young noble lady sits in a box and observes the attentions of several young gentlemen toward a particular woman in the pit below (the woman is evidently a prostitute). Fantomina is perplexed at the tastes of these men and the indifference of the other females around her towards this off-stage show. Nonetheless, she is equally intrigued by it, and with 'no other Aim than the Gratification of an innocent Curiosity' (*F*: 227) she decides to enter into a game of various disguises. Inspired perhaps by what she has witnessed, she adopts the role of a prostitute, taking the name Fantomina and soon attracts the attention of a highly attractive young man, Beauplaisir to whom she loses her virginity. However, in order to maintain the interest of the sexually uninhibited Beauplaisir, she is forced to adopt three more disguises: as a country maid, a prosperous widow and, lastly, as a masked aristocratic lady. Eventually, Fantomina becomes pregnant but this consequence of her escapades is not discovered until the moment of childbirth, whereupon her mother summons Beauplaisir and the truth is revealed. Following childbirth, Fantomina is removed to a French monastery, or nunnery. As we shall see, this was not necessarily a severe punishment, since nunneries at that time were often regarded as centres for the enhancement of female education and the company of other fashionable and cultured women (Backscheider and Richetti, 1996: 248). Beauplaisir is deemed to be innocent in the charade and is therefore unpunished.

Undoubtedly, the novel is brimming with ambiguity. The employment of masquerade and disguise leaves the text open to many interpretations. Critics are divided as to whether its use empowers the heroine or whether it ultimately re-enforces the patriarchal order, especially since she ends up in a convent in France. It is interesting to note that towards the end of her career, Haywood had completely rejected (or at least appeared to reject) her earlier, sexually suggestive texts: 'I can by no means approve of such Definitions of that Passion as we generally find in Romances, Novels, and Plays' (Haywood, 1999: 11). The novels Haywood published in later life were much less risqué and were therefore interpreted as reparation for her 'embarrassing sin of youth' (Saxton, 2000: 9).

Kathleen Lubey argues that Haywood may have been viewed as an author who invited 'an unhealthy, immoral imaginative stasis' (2006: 314) and this explains why she was despised by moralists and authors such as Alexander Pope, who continually insulted her for the supposed licentiousness of her life (Spacks, 1999: ix). Authors like Haywood invented heroines with whom their female readers could identify, but the danger was that 'women could be sexually aroused by reading novels' (Barker-Benfield, 1996: 316-317). Haywood's novels were disapproved of for producing in their readers 'states of languor that gratify sensual appetite rather than engage imaginative curiosity' (Lubey, 2006: 312).

According to Lawrence Stone, marriage had become a delayed venture throughout the eighteenth century, so that the gap between puberty and marriage increased. This led to a higher number of unmarried young people who were not sexually active, yet who were undoubtedly sexually aroused. The supposedly 'dangerous' and much reviled practice of 'self-pollution' lurked in the shadows of society as an omnipresent taboo (1979: 320). The fear that individuals might indulge in the 'sin' of masturbation is a more likely reason for the disapproval of Haywood's novels. The more acceptable medium for dealing with issues relating to passionate feelings and sexuality appeared as advice in conduct manuals.

In 1753, a conduct manual warned young girls to 'delight not in the romantic tales of love; the triumphed beauty and the captive knight are deluding images of thy passions' (Kendrick, 1753 quoted in Morris, 2004: 295). *The Whole*

Duty of a Woman warns women to avoid ‘the bewitching charm of curiosity’ (ibid.: 235), for, according to the conduct manual, *The Ladies Calling*, ‘every indecent curiosity or impure fancy, is a deflowering of the mind, and every the least corruption of them gives some degrees of defilement to the body too’ [sic] (Allestree, 1673: 161). Yielding to curious desires could only lead to evil it was assumed, and readers were constantly reminded that the fall of mankind was due to a woman’s prying mind. Just like Eve, who has been used to justify the mistreatment and subordination of women throughout time, the vilification of women’s curiosity in relation to sexual desire has been used to keep women in their place.

Fantomina decides to pursue her curiosity nonetheless. She has no idea initially of the various disguises she will eventually adopt, nor of the outcome her decisions will lead to, but the courage she shows in pursuing her curiosity through the use of disguise and masquerade is striking, and distinguishes her as an autonomous and fearless young woman. Haywood envisages a trajectory for female self-governance (Ballaster, 1992: 179) by using masquerade and disguise as a ‘positive force within the feminine ideology’ (Schofield, 1990: 47).

Due to its associations with class and personal autonomy, the treatment of disguise and masquerade is a theme that has stimulated a great deal of academic interest in Haywood’s fiction. Masked gatherings and disguised identities were not a new concept in England; costumed assemblies during the eighteenth century were glamorous and sumptuous affairs for public entertainment, and had become ‘an established and ubiquitous feature of urban public life in England’ (Castle, 1986: 2). The English caught this ‘cultural influenza’ from the Spaniards and Italians, whose masked gatherings, such as the Venetian carnival, stimulated a much needed outlet for English life, as there were very few approved modes for cathartic release (ibid.: 7, 18). Men had the liberty of manoeuvring between assembly rooms, taverns, theatre boxes or pits whether in disguise or not, but women did not have this privilege and so the use of the mask could protect their reputation as their identity would remain unknown. While contemplating her use of disguise, Fantomina remarks that ‘it will not be in the Power of my Undoer

himself to triumph over me', and the narrator is continually speaking of 'those ills which might attend the Loss of her Reputation' (*F*: 232-233). Aristocratic women in masquerade or disguise were no longer bound by the reigning social restrictions which confined them to the private sphere.

A woman's so-called feminine virtues of passivity, selflessness, and emotion, supposedly a direct result of her sexual and reproductive make-up, had led to her confinement within the domestic sphere, while by contrast 'men belonged to culture – controlled, systematic, symbolic of achievement and order' (Kingsley-Kent, 1999: 179-180). Any freedom and autonomy enjoyed by a woman was largely dependent upon the position she occupied on the social scale. For example, prostitutes had much more autonomy than noble ladies as there was much less at stake for prostitutes. This is exemplified in the text, as each disguise that Fantomina employs demonstrates how women have less self-autonomy the further up the social ladder they are situated. As a prostitute, Fantomina openly plays the coquette by flirting and laughing with Beauplaisir but as the aristocratic Incognita, however, she conceals her face with a mask and 'blind[s] the Windows' so that her honour remains untarnished (*F*: 245). As Terry Castle points out, the eighteenth-century concept of masquerade allowed for a blurring of class boundaries, for the anonymity it produced enabled everybody and anybody to participate (1986: 33). The masquerade soon became synonymous with sex and licentiousness as language and conduct altered both men and women's individual's behaviour.

Fantomina is presented as alone in town and answerable to no-one, which means that she is able to execute her plan of seduction perfectly, exercising a power that is usually denied females. In the past, Fantomina's 'quality and reputed Virtue' as a young lady of noble birth would have impeded Beauplaisir from considering any sexual interaction between them (*F*: 228). Readers are told that she is 'naturally vain' and that she enjoys the praise she receives from the men at the theatre before she catches the eye of Beauplaisir (*F*: 227). She is new to this feeling and the sense of anonymity it creates excites her. Fantomina realizes that she may be able to use what Catherine Hakim has called 'erotic

capital' to lure Beauplaisir (2011: 1, 2). According to Hakim, this asset combines 'beauty, sex appeal, skills of self-presentation, and social skills' and is the 'biggest trump card' a heterosexual woman can possess as it is a key function in the arousal of male desire (ibid.: 79, 4-6).

Under her disguise, Fantomina claims an element of seductive power for her advantage. She manages to seduce Beauplaisir's mind and arouse his body with her 'Beauty' and 'Wit' but refrains from relieving him of 'those Desires she had inspired' (*F*: 228). In fact, his desire for her becomes greater. The 'remembrance of his disappointment' leaves him forlorn but Fantomina is overjoyed that her true identity has had 'the good Luck to come off undiscovered' (*F*: 229). She plays the game of being his object of desire but withdraws without satisfying him. This evokes curiosity and excitement on his part as she becomes unattainable. Beauplaisir is to a large extent under Fantomina's control. He is an example of what Esther Vilar calls male 'enslavement' through the use of masks and 'synthetic femininity', that is, femininity encouraged by cosmetics, hair and apparel, which deliberately create the 'conspicuous' difference of the 'equivocal, unknown, "opposite sex"' (1988: 119). Indeed, according to Patricia Meyer Spacks, beauty too 'is an acceptable source of female power' and Fantomina is evidently competent enough to make use of hers (1976: 127).

Hakim argues that men and women's daily interactions are governed by the male libido which is never fully satisfied and which creates a space for women to explore and maximize power 'at man's expense' (2011: 6). Fantomina believes that by tending to her personal appearance and exaggerating her sexuality, she will obtain Beauplaisir's attention and ensnare him, for she 'understood that [sexual] Language but too well' (*F*: 235). She is equally aware that Beauplaisir is not unlike other men in his inability to 'prolong Desire, to any great Length after Possession' (ibid. 233), therefore her use of disguise assists in the loss of her own inhibitions as well as the opportunity to satisfy Beauplaisir's sexual demands.

Kathleen Lubey notes how the males in Haywood's novels are often driven by 'dumb lust' (2006: 314). Indeed, when Fantomina dons the disguise of a country maid whom she names Celia, Beauplaisir is 'fired with the first Sight of

her' (*F*: 235). He does not recognize her with her 'Hair and Eye-brows blackened', a 'round eared Cap' and 'a rude unpolished Air', and 'soon [loses] the Power of containing himself' (*F*: 234, 235). Those raging 'wild Desires' explode while he 'devour[s] her Lips, her Breasts with greedy Kisses, [...] til he ravaged all and glutted each rapacious Sense', so that 'Death' was the 'Consequence' (*ibid.*: 235). She too yearns for him sexually, 'remembering the Height of Transport she enjoyed when the agreeable Beauplaisir kneeled at her Feet' (*ibid.*: 234). This undoubtedly makes her more desirable to Beauplaisir. Juliette Merritt states that for women 'the desire to be desirable is central to their identity and their sexuality' (2004: 8).

In order to have Beauplaisir 'always raving, wild' for her and for her to not lose 'the Heart she so lately had regained', Fantomina resolves to avert any possible suspicion of her disguise by accepting payment from Beauplaisir and playing the simpleton (*F*: 243, 235). She exclaims, 'O Law, Sir! what must I do for all this?' (*F*: 235). Her naiveté flatters him and he laughs, allowing Beauplaisir to believe that he is in control of the situation. This accords with Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that 'erotic transcendence [for the female] consists in becoming prey in order to gain her ends' (1983: 361). After she and Beauplaisir have had sexual intercourse for the first time, Fantomina is apparently troubled by the 'Folly that betrayed [her] to [him]' which conveys to him the message that her social standing must be of some considerable magnitude or she would not have been so vocal in her lamentations (*F*: 231). Allowing Beauplaisir to believe that she has fallen from such a high place to one of disgrace and humiliation, arguably, produces a power imbalance that inflates Beauplaisir's ego, as he supposes himself her superior. However, as the injured party of the sexual double standard 'by which women are denied active subjectivity' (Saxton, 2000: 4), Fantomina is able to obligate Beauplaisir to meet her the following day, for his 'Love alone can compensate for the Shame' (*ibid.*: 232).

By deliberately promoting herself as a victim, she 'outwit[s] even the most Subtle of the deceiving Kind' – Fantomina considers Beauplaisir to be 'the only beguiled Person' (*F*: 239). In order to gain the upper hand and autonomy over

their own lives, Fantomina suggests, ‘that all neglected Wives, and fond abandoned Nymphs would take this Method! – Men would be caught in their own Snare, and have no Cause to scorn our easy weeping wailing Sex!’ (*F*: 243). Fantomina refuses to be ‘deceived and cheated’ like other women, who ‘make their Life a Hell, burning in fruitless Expectations’ at the lies of men (*F*: 239). She disapproves of ‘our silly, fond, believing Sex’ who ‘put Faith in man’ and in so doing, are always ‘vainly waiting’ (*ibid.*). As Jean Baker-Miller states, ‘the woman is usually highly skilful; the most effective are careful not to let on how skilful they really are’ (1991: 14-15). Beauplaisir’s true motive is simply to have sexual intercourse with as many women as he can, and, knowing this, Fantomina believes she is now one step ahead of him.

Not only does Haywood invalidate the myth of man’s superior intelligence over woman, she reveals that women can be sexy and smart at the same time, a ‘double advantage’ according to Hakim (2011: 2). Indeed, the narrator comments on how Fantomina congratulates herself for having ‘more Prudence than all her Sex beside’ (*F*: 233), and as Audrey Lorde suggests, ‘women so empowered are dangerous’ in the sense that they may destabilize the social order (2012: 55). A further case in point regarding Fantomina’s double advantage is the incredulity that Beauplaisir and Fantomina’s mother experience when her actions are revealed. Beauplaisir is amazed that ‘he should have been blinded so often by her Artifices’, and Fantomina’s mother wonders how ‘so young a Creature should have the Skill to make use of them’ (*F*: 248). This suggests that women were usually understood to possess either brains or beauty, but not both.

Haywood’s heroine certainly transgresses the boundaries of standard women’s roles as Fantomina is both clever and alluring. As Karen Lebacqz argues, ‘[w]e are accustomed to male power because it surrounds us [...]. Men and women alike are socialized not only to think that being a man means being in control but also to find male domination sexually arousing’ (quoted in Joy, 1996: 123). Fantomina’s disguise becomes a technique by which she can overcome the boundaries of her restricted social standing and achieve some personal autonomy. According to Lorde, a woman’s ‘erotic power’ is ‘an assertion of the life force of

women' which women use to reclaim language, history and other parts of their lives (2012: 55). It reaches far beyond anything sexual but has been 'devalued' as an 'inferiority' in women and at the same time 'vilified' as something shameful and wicked (ibid.: 53). Haywood, it could be argued, exposes something along these lines by allowing the narrator to comment that these 'unthought-of Ways' may be considered 'the greatest Curse' in other females, but to Fantomina they are assets which make her 'more blessed' since she is able to 'triumph' over Beauplaisir and still gain sexual fulfillment (*F*: 243).

Fantomina's alternative identity offers her a chance to exist as a sexual woman, whilst protecting her public identity (2004: 51). Each of her disguises arguably exploits the more stereotypical female images of male fantasy such as the prostitute and the mysterious masked lady and each performs a role for the benefit of that desire. The psychoanalytic idea of the double or split self is apposite here; in experiencing the doubleness that masquerade and disguise naturally accord with, Castle believes that Fantomina is able to experience the complex relationship between the familiar and unfamiliar, the self and other (Castle, 1986: 4, 5, 25).

Wendy Doniger takes the duality of masquerade a step further by suggesting that sexual masqueraders, or 'bedtricksters' as she likes to call them, withhold everything but sex from their identities and open up a floodgate of endless potential by dividing their sexual self (2000: 6, 7). This is arguably the case for Fantomina as she gives herself sexually to Beauplaisir but her awareness of his 'Inconstancy' and flippant nature prevents her 'from having that real Tenderness for him she would else have had' (*F*: 240). She withholds not only her true physical appearance from Beauplaisir but also her heart, and this opens up other feelings within her which lead to new sensations. The duality produced when wearing a disguise or mask coincides with Freud's assertion that 'a person may identify himself with another' and in doing so, becomes 'duplicated, divided [or] interchanged' (2003: 142). Disguised, Fantomina takes pleasure in socialising with Beauplaisir 'in this free and unrestrained Manner' (*F*: 228). Since the two had not communicated while Fantomina appeared as her true self, she welcomes

the opportunity to adopt a more sexually assertive role, one, it could be argued, that is often associated with the male hunter (a point I explore further in Chapter Two). Hiding behind various disguises which entice Beauplaisir, she also 'imagin[es] a world of Satisfaction to herself in engaging him in the Character of such a one' (ibid.: 229).

Joan Riviere suggests that females who wish to adopt more masculine roles, or take up characteristics traditionally associated with males, such as self-assertion and aggression, may portray a façade of hyper-womanliness, using clothing, mannerisms or both, to misdirect male angst and the consequences of any chastisement (1966: 210). During the eighteenth century, women were instructed to be virtuous and modest but paradoxically, their clothing provided a stimulus which contradicted this expectation. This is obvious in the fashionable corsets that advertised women's sexual assets by pulling in their waists with steel which simultaneously accentuated their buttocks and breasts. Corsets, petticoats and other garments were an important exposition of femininity but they also reveal a certain hypocrisy within eighteenth-century society, which highlighted the complex interplay between sexuality, masquerade and performance. Hakim believes that masculinity and femininity are 'a creation, a work of art' and nothing short of 'skilled performances' (2011: 26).

Riviere argues that essentially there is no difference between 'womanliness' and 'masquerade' as ultimately they are both acts, but while women are conscious of this deployment, men are deceived by it (1966: 311). For example, Fantomina is 'so admirably skilled in the Art of feigning, that she had the Power of putting on almost what Face she pleased' (*F*: 238). Indeed, 'She could vary her very Glances, tune her Voice to Accents the most different imaginable' and the narrator remarks that some similarity between the masquerader and Fantomina is contemplated, but her identity manages to remain hidden because of her exaggerated performance (ibid.). This means that Fantomina is able to acquire some mutability within her gendered role. It is therefore not merely a matter of fixed sexuality but one of gendered flexibility. Fantomina is not tied to a particular mode of femininity such as that

circumscribed by her aristocratic status and, as such, she can masquerade as the prostitute as much as the sorrowful widow. This bears out Judith Butler's argument about the fluidity of gender and her contention that gender is a performed role inscribed by society:

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (Butler, 1999: 173)

The protagonist's scheme to disguise herself as a 'sorrowful *Widow*' who has 'lost all that ought to be valuable to Womankind' (*F* : 236) is relevant to the argument of hyper-womanliness put forth by Riviere. The widow invites sympathy from Beauplaisir as she declares her guilt for outliving her husband, the 'Master of every Perfection' (*F*: 236). Her 'Sighs and Groans', produce tears 'in such abundance' that Beauplaisir cannot help but make tender proclamations to her (*ibid.*: 236-237). The widow pretends to be overwhelmed and it is at this point that she carries out an act typically associated with eighteenth-century femininity: she faints and falls 'motionless upon his Breast' (*F*: 238). Spacks argues that 'innocence might provide a valuable screen to hide behind', for as a widow, Fantomina's modesty and feigned naivety protect her desires but she is nonetheless able to achieve pleasure behind the veil of virtue (1974: 32). Unable to accept Beauplaisir's advances in the same way as that of a prostitute, as a widow, Fantomina must act the part of a respectable and loyal wife who is overcome with emotion at the mere touch from another man. The use of these tactics enables Haywood to advance the plot but also to bestow on Fantomina the self-autonomy she needs to move forward with Beauplaisir. Haywood is using the male script to claim female autonomy, which as Schofield points out, was 'only revealed if read femininely' (1986: 189). Indeed, read femininely, the contradiction is that a woman's 'vulnerability' turns out to be her greatest weapon and the fountainhead of her power (*ibid.*). Fantomina's theatrics are so convincing that the narrator declares that 'all the comedians at both Playhouses are infinitely short of her Performances' (*F*: 238).

According to Schofield, Haywood uses masquerade in two ways; first to highlight the passive nature of women in contrast to the active will of men, but also to 'articulate the unspoken ideologies of the women themselves; their masks denote the desire for power that women have' (1990: 44). In order to compensate for their 'natural "wound"' (or lack of a penis) according to Sarah Kofman's interpretation of Freud, women focus on their looks, devising masks and fixations for the sole purpose of seducing men (1985: 212). Beautification, she explains, 'hide[s] the ugliness of women's incomplete sexual organs' (ibid.), but it will also, as Amal Treacher points out, help women attain 'the penis of a good man which can now heal and fill up the aching void' (1988: 85).

Fantomina is not content to wait for Beauplaisir to decide if and when he is going to satiate her and decides to pursue him while making it appear to him that he is chasing her. Fantomina therefore reverses and 'rewrite[s] the tale of the persecuted maiden' (Croskery, 2000: 72), making Beauplaisir the victim, rather than herself (Schofield, 1990: 192). Beauplaisir feels 'such an undeniable Earnestness' and 'Violence of the Passion' for Fantomina who is now dressed as the masked lady Incognita, and is stunned and humiliated when she leaves without revealing her identity. As Fantomina hurries 'out of the Room with too much Swiftness for him to have overtaken her' she leaves him 'in the same Darkness as before' (*F*: 244, 245). Her plan to render Beauplaisir powerless, or as Tania Modleski puts it, to see him on his knees, 'grovelling, grovelling, grovelling' (1990: 37), is characteristic of the underlying sadistic desire to see the male suffer at the hands of the female (Williams, 1989: 219). As Linda Williams explains, the 'sadoomasochistic games of power and pleasure' that Fantomina engages in renders Beauplaisir susceptible and helpless, which enhances the potential of woman's sexual ferocity and erotic power (ibid.). Fantomina has given Beauplaisir a taste of his own medicine and she enjoys his humiliation, proving that by using her brains and beauty, she is undoubtedly 'skilled in the Art of feigning' (*F*: 238).

The narrator states that Fantomina ‘love[s]’ Beauplaisir, however what remains uncertain is the depth or veracity of this love, and to what extent it is fuelled by her sexual desires. By demonstrating Fantomina’s erotic wishes through the use of disguise and masquerade, Lubey argues that Haywood is able to convey a very important message to her female readers about love during the eighteenth century. She believes that Haywood’s aim was to counsel women about the powerful, ‘overwhelming’ force of love, which might ‘escalate into impropriety’ if not carefully monitored (2006: 314). Haywood’s dedication to the Earl of Suffolk and Bindon in her 1723 novel *Lasselia, or The Self-Abandon’d* states:

My design in writing this little Novel (as well as those I have formerly publish’d) being only to remind the unthinking Part of the World, how dangerous it is to give way to Passion. (1723/1999: 105)

Although this statement relates to an earlier novel, it is possible to consider it in a reading of *Fantomina*. Instead of sermonizing against corporeal indulgence within her novels, Haywood raises the awareness of female sexual desire, establishing a space in which women can safely discover the way in which passion is ‘ignited, intensified and consummated’ while simultaneously guarding against it (Lubey, 2006: 322).

Despite these ‘proto-feminist’ aspects of *Fantomina*, the story can also be read as a text which does not seem to empower the heroine at all, and one in which Haywood’s transgressive intentions are highly dubious. According to Catherine Craft-Fairchild, ‘masquerade does not alter women’s status – it leaves them inscribed in the dominant economy as objects of male vision and masculine desire’ (1993: 53). By using specific disguises that she knows are sure to attract Beauplaisir, Fantomina forms her external appearance in accordance with what she believes will coincide with Beauplaisir’s tastes. Her exterior must be pleasing to his eye and Fantomina must continually invest in the self-titivation of male-prescribed versions of beauty for validation. Indeed, in *Fantomina*’s world, ‘Beauty [...] alone can bring back the fugitive lover’ (*F*: 233-234). She must continually conform to one particular type of attractiveness and one form of

desire: male desire. If she does not meet the criteria, she may consider herself worthless. Thus, Fantomina is perpetually at the mercy of the male gaze. Like many other women, she continually looks at herself, and judges her existence, consciously or not, through a man's eyes, for his vision, is arguably, the one that society values in a patriarchal society. Laura Mulvey, in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' argues that the gaze belongs to men and women remain passive. A woman, she states, 'stands in a patriarchal culture as signifier for the male Other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions' (1988: 58). According to Jacques Lacan the 'symbolic order' is signified by a paternal metaphor whereby authority, law and order are 'recognize[d]' and 'identified' in the '*name of the father*' (1989:74). Elizabeth Grosz explains that for Lacan, 'the symbolic father is the (ideal) embodiment of paternal authority, the locus from which patriarchal law and language come' (1990: 74). This social structure enables men to take up the position of the gazer while women remain the ones who are gazed at.

The description of Fantomina's body parts and Beauplaisir's reactions to them bears out the idea of the male gaze: 'Her fine Shape and Air and Neck appeared to great Advantage' and Beauplaisir was 'wild with Impatience for the Sight of a Face which belonged to so exquisite a Body' (*F*: 244). As one critic argues, masquerade is built upon 'seeing and being seen', appearing to be nothing more than 'a painful submission to male scopophilia' (Craft-Fairchild, 1993: 53, 4). In other words, some women submit, albeit unconsciously, to the sexual pleasure that men obtain from looking at them. Through the use of disguise and masquerade, Fantomina is reduced to seeing herself through the eyes of Beauplaisir who, as a man, will determine the standard that she will judge herself by, which exists solely to provide an advantage to him.

Furthermore, a gynocritical interpretation of the kind put forward in Showalter's 1986 essay, 'Toward a Feminist Poetics', might suggest that Fantomina's endeavour to chase Beauplaisir back and forth is degrading and undignified. Her whole existence seems to revolve around the time-consuming task of obtaining his affections; she lives only for him. Her 'design' is to 'engage

him, to hear him sigh, to see him languish, to feel the strenuous Pressures of his eager Arms' (A.: 234) but Beauplaisir has tired of her and she is aware of it. As 'The rifled Charms of Fantomina soon [lose] their Poignancy, and [grow] tasteless and insipid' (F: 233), she is keen to relive the autonomy she has previously enjoyed, and as de Beauvoir states, 'invent new seductions for the lover' (1983: 674). There are no limits to what Fantomina will do to achieve this end.

De Beauvoir argues that women try in vain to regain the image of the woman that the male was initially attracted to (ibid.). Arguably, some women, do tend to mould themselves to their lover's wishes and as they offer themselves in this way, de Beauvoir argues, that they lose the sense of freedom that attracted the lover in the first place (ibid.: 674-675). In other words, they are no longer carefree, unattainable and mysterious creatures but desperate, neurotic women. The hollow void females endeavour to fill stems from the fact that their whole existence is 'nothing' in comparison to man's, therefore 'all she is, all she has, every moment of her life, must be devoted to him' (ibid.: 661). A woman's effort to gain male attention and approval by 'play-acting and falsification' is not because she desires a penis, but because she desires the autonomy that comes with having a penis. The charade of femininity is therefore pointless, as women are 'doomed to secrecy and lies' (ibid.: 80).

Luce Irigaray claims that women have to undertake the role of femininity 'deliberately' and in doing so lose a part of themselves because femininity demands that the female over-acts the part assigned to her (1985: 76, 84). In this way, as Esther Vilar points out, a woman becomes the 'victim of her own (female) system' (1988: 149). As she endeavours to obtain autonomy by exercising an exaggerated femininity, or erotic capital, which is nothing but an act, a woman's true self is jeopardized, for her identity becomes reconstructed in accordance with male paradigms. If read from this perspective, the heroine of *Fantomina* does not gain any agency at all and her disguise is nothing more than 'a sophisticated form of oppression' (Craft-Fairchild, 1993: 5). According to Lorde, female strength is merely an illusion since in the end it is formed upon a framework based on male types (2012: 53).

The ending of *Fantomina* can also be unconvincing from a proto-feminist perspective. Beauplaisir emerges unpunished while Fantomina is banished to a nunnery. Because of this, Craft argues that Fantomina's sexual freedom is also a delusion and the protagonist's transgression is 'contained' at the end of the tale (1991: 11). However it is possible that Fantomina's 'conformity' was a deliberate ploy on Haywood's part. In *The Female Spectator* she writes that 'whenever we would truly conquer we must seem to yield' which may demonstrate a conscious knowledge about the way women are subjected to male dictated principles (Haywood quoted in Spacks, 1999: 116). Fantomina's eviction to a convent appears, at least at first glance, a punishment no different to death. A life of seclusion from hetero-society would ultimately deny her any possibility of marriage and motherhood. On the other hand, as Janice Raymond suggests, there were distinct advantages to living in female-only institutions such as a convent which, she argues, recreates and determines itself as a 'hetaerocracy' whereby the social and emotional needs of women are maintained by female friendship (2001: 78). This opposes the theory that women were grudgingly sent and confined to convents indefinitely (ibid.: 80). Haywood may therefore be suggesting that her heroine escapes from patriarchy in a quite literal sense.

It is certainly the case that, rather than being centres of deprivation, convents grew to be 'women-enriching' hubs which offered 'intellectual, spiritual, and political' sovereignty to women who might not otherwise have recourse to them in the outside world (ibid.: 81). Convents were places which cultivated female autonomy and independence away from the heterosexual society which as Monique Wittig argues, moulds women in relation to its men and results in their 'personal', 'physical' and 'economic obligation' (1992: 20). Wittig further argues that men and women are 'political concepts of opposition' which are based on the notion of difference, where males have a need to control females as the different/other in an 'act of power' (ibid.). Nunneries were male-free alternatives for women who wanted to evade male observation and criticism, for, as Annis Pratt indicates, 'our quests for being are thwarted on every side by what we are told to be and to do, which is different from what men are told to be and to do' (1981: 6). Nancy Cott also argues that in female-only institutions, women entered

into friendships with other women as humans, rather than as definitions set up by patriarchal societies (1997: 190). These institutions offered a woman's best chance of escaping her perceived gender inadequacies – her 'talents, needs, outlooks, [and] inclinations' were then forged through female bonds which 'confirmed her own value' (1997: 190). Nunneries and other female communities need not be perceived as harsh punishments but, rather, as centres of respite and liberation from male tyranny. Fantomina will be presented with an opportunity to socialise and work with other members of her own sex, away from men. These establishments can encourage female autonomy and release sexual tension through companionship and mutual respect, and in doing so, offer a chance to evade the negative consequences that may come about through the repression of thoughts or actions. The desperate and somewhat dangerous effects of suppressing sexual desire and female autonomy is one of the themes of Mary Hays' novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), to which we now turn in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two

‘Moon Struck Madness’: Infatuation and Epistolary Stalking in Mary Hays’ *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796)

The most fastidious spirits are given to curiosity and prepossession; this is to be seen, especially in beings in which that scared fire, the source of the passions, is extinct. These beings, either too ardent or excessive in their ardour, amorous on credit, if one may use the expression, throw themselves at objects instead of awaiting them. (Stendhal, 1915: 66)

Mary Hays’ 1796 novel, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is based on Hays’ own life, and particularly her unrequited love and correspondence with William Frend. The eponymous heroine has been described as a ‘humourless, passionate, evidently neurotic woman’ (Butler, 1987: 44) for beleaguering ‘a man impenetrable as a rock’ to love her (*MEC*: 139). Born in 1759 into a middle class English family of Dissenters, the early death of her father meant that Hays and her siblings were raised solely by their mother (Bergmann, 2011: 5). Hays was therefore not a stranger to the struggles that often accompanied womanhood during the eighteenth century, yet she became an innovative, passionate and revolutionary writer. In 1777 she fell in love with John Eccles, a fellow Dissenter, but their union was condemned by both families. With the help of Hays’ sister Elizabeth, they met in secret until finally, in 1780, the families consented to their marriage. The euphoria was short lived as Eccles fell ill and died before the couple could marry. Hays was heartbroken and remained unmarried for the rest of her days (Luria-Walker, 2006: 13). She would, however, acquire a number of important friendships throughout her life that would console her for her loss and contribute to her ‘new-fangled philosophical ideas’ (Bergmann, 2011: 5, 15).

Hays enrolled at New College, a well-known Dissenting academy and immersed herself in the theories set out by Bacon, Newton and Locke (Luria-Walker, 2006: 15). She published her first book, *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous* (1793) which was her attempt to elucidate the theories of the

Enlightenment and justify her religious views to women (ibid.: 17). This led to a close friendship with the radical feminist Mary Wollstonecraft and the two, according to Gina Luria-Walker revealed to each other their ‘unconventional ambitions’ for equality, education, self-governance, and, possibly, their desire for ‘romance with radical men’ (2006: 17).

Hays often worked alongside Wollstonecraft, becoming a reviewer for periodicals of a radical nature and submitting her own writings for publication (ibid.). After Wollstonecraft wrote a memoir of her travels, Hays decided to publish *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* based on her unreciprocated love of William Frend. Her novel was ‘much praised and much abused’ (Southey, 1851 quoted in Luria-Walker, 2006: 18), and Hays was aggrieved but remained brave in the face of the humiliation she experienced from the public’s negative views (ibid.). The incorporation of Hays’ autobiographical material was considered scandalous since it appeared to give sexual license to women (Butler, 1987: 117). Notwithstanding the scandal, Hays continued to support herself with her pen, illustrating a further commitment to the emancipation of women in her later work, although perhaps not quite so combatively (Ty, 2009: xxxvi). Her writing earned her adequate royalties but to supplement her revenue, Hays turned her talents to children’s fiction (Luria-Walker, 2006: 19). She later withdrew herself from society, to avoid further ‘exposure to public ostracism’ (Bergmann, 2011: 5). She died in 1893.

Memoirs of Emma Courtney is presented in an epistolary format, and begins with the particulars of Emma’s birth and how she is entrusted into the care of her maternal aunt and uncle after her mother dies in childbirth. Her father, ‘a man of pleasure’ (MEC: 30) is only involved financially in Emma’s childhood and no emotional attachments are made with him. Emma matures into a happy and precocious child, but her father suddenly sends her to a boarding school, which she abhors. Her mind ‘coerced’ and body ‘tortured into forms’ that are clearly unfamiliar to her, she feels neglected and unloved (MEC: 15). When her boarding school education ends, she begins to spend time with her father who seeks to educate and moderate her character, believing she ‘requires a rein rather than a spur’ (MEC: 21). By the time she is eighteen, her uncle, aunt and father have all

died and Emma is sent to live with her paternal uncle and his family. She is subjected to continuous spite and cruelty here but soon befriends Mrs Harley, a surrogate mother figure, and falls in love with her son, Augustus Harley. She also develops two other important friendships with the opposite sex. The first of these is with a Mr Francis (who comes to represent Hays' real life friend William Godwin), and the second is a Mr Montague whom she later weds out of financial desperation. Emma's unrequited love for Harley (who is based on Frennd), becomes nothing short of an infatuation which manifests itself in a torrent of letters. Desperate for Harley's affections, she offers to become his mistress, a proposition he rejects but without giving a reason. When it is finally revealed that he is already married, Emma is distraught. She endeavours to forget him, and agrees to marry Montague, but when Harley is seriously injured in an accident and brought to her, it stirs up buried emotions. Harley soon dies, and Emma is not long after left widowed, for her husband commits suicide. She must now raise her child and Harley's son, the young Augustus, fulfilling Harley's last dying wish. The novel is supposedly offered as a cautionary tale to the young Augustus in matters of the heart, as it begins and ends with letters to him.

Amatory novels by earlier writers such as Eliza Haywood, Delariviere Manley and Aphra Behn which openly conveyed eroticism had become deeply unfashionable by the time Hays was publishing (Barker-Benfield, 1992: 330). Sentimental novels and epistolary forms had become the new popular form for writing about the lives of women. They imparted information that may have been considered inappropriate by the standards of conventional society but it asserted an 'immediacy and presence' (Rajan, 2010: 86). The fact that Hays took up the pen at all was in itself a rebellious move, for as Barker-Benfield points out, 'women's ability to write and read letters contributed decisively to their sexual self-assertion' (1992: 326). Emma's frustrations of the mind and flesh are visible in the text. She tries to convince Mrs Melmoth that, 'to be treated like *ideots* [sic] was no real compliment; and that the men who condescend to flatter our foibles, despised the weak beings they helped to form' (*MEC*: 113). According to Helena Bergmann, Emma was seen as the epitome of female 'audacity' (2011: 2) but like

other writers of the ‘confessional pseudo-memoir’ (Kelly, 1993:118), Hays was able to express her ‘radical otherness’ in her ‘narrative[s] of truth’ which sought to answer the eternal question of what it was women wanted (Culler, 1982: 58).

Conduct books of the time warned against women’s aspirations for knowledge:

It is not for thee, O woman to undergo the perils of the deep, to dig in the hollow mines of the earth, to trace the dark springs of science, or to number the thick stairs of the heavens. (Kendrick, 1753 quoted in Morris, 2004: 247)

Historically, women had been discouraged from learning or exploring. An earlier conduct manual illustrates how women were expected to ‘Bridle the Tongue, and seal up [their] Lips; for when passion wants vent, it will suppress itself, and like fire for want of air, be naturally extinguished’ (Allestree, 1673: 97). Women who articulated their grievances and overtly explored them because they felt their wishes were of equal importance to those of men were usually regarded as troublemakers, and would have had to endure the ‘psychological burden of rejecting men’s images of “true womanhood”’ (Miller, 1991: 17). Hays’ novel is emblematic of the Romantic movement which was a revolt against the Enlightenment period that tended to focus on reason and logic, as opposed to Romanticism’s emphasis on the individual and the expression of the emotions. However this doctrine was only applicable to men. Women who thought for themselves, spoke out or expressed themselves in any way and read books as Emma did, were seen as unfeminine (Bergmann, 2011: 4). Emma witnesses this reproach one evening in a comment by her father’s guest on the fact that she likes to read books:

Heavens, Mr Courtney! you will spoil all her feminine graces; knowledge and learning, are insufferably masculine in a woman – born only for the soft solace of man! The mind of a young lady should be clear and unsullied, like a sheet of white paper, or her own fairer face: lines of thinking destroy the dimples of beauty; aping the reason of man, they lose the exquisite, *fascinating* charm, in which consists their true empire. (MEC: 22-23)

Hays' main concern was with the inequality of the sexes and the emancipation of women, much like her comrade Mary Wollstonecraft (Ty, 1996: xviii). Wollstonecraft argues that 'liberty is the mother of virtue, and if women be, by their very constitution, slaves, and not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must ever languish' (1992: 122). Emma's letter to Harley informs readers that 'Those who deviate from the beaten track must expect to be entangled in the thicket, and wounded by many a thorn' (*MEC*: 90). Bergmann argues that Emma is caught between the role expected of her in society, and her impulse to release her repressed desire for the male other (2011: 51). Freud might suggest Emma's situation as a definite case of the 'masculinity complex' (1986: 428). Kofman points out however, that a strong female who refuses to accept 'castration', who faces men rather than stooping down to them, who feels no humiliation or contempt, who is unable to recognize an inferiority and jeopardize male supremacy is, in fact a woman who 'does not envy the penis [...] because she feels she has one' (1985: 203-204). This view is interesting when read in conjunction with Monique Wittig's assertion, that a woman who renounces womanliness does not necessarily assume masculinity, rather, it indicates that the woman has 'escaped her initial programming' (1992: 12). In this sense Emma refuses to adhere to the standard notion of femininity demarcated by society.

Both Wollstonecraft and Hays, intellectuals in their own right, condemn the manufactured nature of women as meek and docile objects. Hays believed that women were confined to a role which allowed them little movement or fluidity to exercise their creativity or indulge their desires. Her novel is therefore a critique of the symbolic order and the restrictions it placed upon women. Although Hays' true objectives are said to have been overshadowed by the vilification of her character (Bergmann, 2011: 6), a letter to William Godwin dated 28 July 1795 makes Hays' feelings clear:

While men pursue honor, pleasure, interest & ambition as accords with their several dispositions – Women, who have too much sense, spirit & delicacy, to degrade themselves by the vilest of all interchanges, remain insulated beings, & must be content tamely to look on, without taking any part in the great, tho' absurd & often tragical, drama of life. (Hays quoted in Brooks, 2000: 229)

Like Wollstonecraft, Hays believes that the fate of woman is doomed if the 'ardent spirit' is 'denied a scope for its exertions' (*MEC*: 85-86). Emma observes the women around her, engaged in 'domestic employment, or the childish vanity of varying external ornaments' who are contented by 'the insipid *routine* of heartless, mindless' chatter (*MEC*: 85). She asks, 'Why was I not educated for commerce, for a profession, for labour? Why have I been rendered feeble and delicate by bodily constraint, and fastidious by artificial refinement?' (*MEC*: 32). Wollstonecraft similarly argues against 'false refinement' which renders civilized women weak and serves only to make them dependant on males and the 'prey of their [own] senses' (1992: 153). Emma explains that her passions are formed from 'a *solitary madness in the eighteenth century*', since she is prohibited 'from expanding [her] sensations, and wedding [her] soul to society' (*MEC*: 143). The Enlightenment promised liberty for all and, accordingly, Hays hoped for female emancipation. At the same time, she also possessed heightened sensibilities and strong emotions which contradicted Enlightenment principles (Ty, 2009: xix). By 'taking the initiative' to express her desires and accosting Harley through her emotions, Emma violates the existing norms of gender expectations (Rajan, 2010: 87) and can therefore be read as a proto-feminist heroine.

Baker-Miller states that historically and culturally women have been persuaded that as the more emotional sex, their emotions have made them weaker than men. However, she continues that since women have been reared from childbirth to be more sensitive and susceptible to the heart, they are, in fact, more attuned to humanity than men, who have been taught from childbirth to deny and even repulse their feelings (1991: 27-32). Emma's letters are clear and concise, and although repetitious, she is able to articulate her feelings and thoughts well. At no point does Harley tell Emma that he does not return her feelings of love. He merely states that his mind 'is differently constituted' from hers (*MEC*: 159), indicating his belief that men and women are nurtured to think and act differently. According to Barker-Benfield, making men more 'sensitive' or emotional would have caused them to be seen as more 'effeminate', raising all sorts of questions

about sex and gender roles (1992: 342). On his death bed Harley finally admits something that Emma had sensed all along: that he did in fact love her, that her ‘too tender’ heart belonged only to him, but he knew not how to express his feelings for her (*MEC*: 174):

I may, without a crime, tell you – *that I have loved you*. – Your tenderness early penetrated my heart – aware of its weakness – I sought to shun you – I imposed on myself those severe laws of which you causelessly complained. – Had my conduct been less rigid, I had been lost.
(*MEC*: 178)

It could be argued that since we do not have the story from Harley’s perspective, every letter received, and every declaration of love from Emma might have caused him indescribable torment, but he was simply incapable of articulating his emotions, subscribing to a more Enlightenment way of thinking. Furthermore, any future with Emma is impossible since he is promised to another, thus Harley simply endeavours to block Emma from his life. Later however, he admits that ‘the fire which is pent up burns the fiercest!’ (*MEC*: 178). Harley suffers as he is unwilling, or unable to articulate his emotions. Judith Butler would argue that it is the cultural construction of male and female identity that produces these distinctions in behaviour. As Baker-Miller suggests, the so called emotional weakness in women is therefore, actually a strength and an advantage that men lack, as society teaches men to suppress, even ‘discard’ their emotions, as is evident with Harley (1991: 29, 31- 32). Baker-Miller further suggests that the way women are taught to embrace their feelings and sensibility, places them therefore in a better position to ‘understand weakness more readily and to work productively with it’ as they have a closer link with their ‘central human condition, by having to defend less and deny less’ (*ibid.*: 31-32).

It could further be argued that the acceptance of one’s emotions greatly assists in the acquisition of wisdom, since it is personal knowledge and experience that become the foundation for sensible choices and decisions. According to Eleanor Ty, Hays certainly associated sensibility with acuteness and heightened sensuality and this comes through in Emma’s character (2009: xix). Emma explains that ‘*the desire of being beloved*, of inspiring sympathy, is congenial to

the human heart' (*MEC*: 79) and, although she suffers, she becomes wiser and more experienced since she has 'acquired the power of reasoning on this subject at a dear rate – at the expense of inconceivable suffering' (*MEC*: 147).

Ty goes further by suggesting that Emma's sensibilities and emotions are 'indicative of a fiery force' that drives her in her quest to obtain her beloved (2009: xx). A major theme within the narrative is Emma's desire for love, sexual intimacy, freedom and knowledge, and the desire for equality which she articulates without a care for pride or dignity. All that matters is that she conveys her yearning for Harley. A woman's desire, according to Luce Irigaray, 'is often interpreted, and feared, as a sort of insatiable hunger, a voracity that will swallow you whole' (1985: 29). Emma takes the lead by declaring the physical effect Harley has had on her body:

I frankly avow, while my cheeks glow with the blushes of *modesty*, not of shame, that your virtues and accomplishments have excited in my bosom an affection, as pure as the motives which gave it birth, and as animated as it is pure. (*MEC*: 79-80)

Emma desires Harley and therefore takes the initiative to offer herself sexually to him. She writes, '*My friend – I would give myself to you – the gift is not worthless*' (*MEC*: 124). In his discussion on the depiction of men and women in eighteenth-century novels, Barker-Benfield states that men are often portrayed as the predatory hunting animal 'pursuing' and 'devouring' females, who are usually portrayed as and compared to 'domestic' animals, 'vulnerable', and therefore injured by the hunt (1992: 234-235). As passive objects, women were not supposed to make the first move towards men, and their true desires were rarely known (Baker, 1989: 39). Since convention held that men were the hunters and women the hunted, the difficulty lay in how women should best 'pursue actively, while appearing to be passively waiting' (*ibid.*). Sentimental fiction's attempt to address the way animals were portrayed and treated was part of a 'surrogate feminism' which took precedence for some female novelists (Barker-Benfield, 1992: 236). Historically, women had been associated with animals, but their refusal to continue as the hunter's prey was a woman's way of declaring that she

no longer wished to be treated like a weak creature but as an equal (ibid.). Like other women of the period, Hays' protagonist demands equality, education and liberty and takes on the role of the predatory hunter herself.

This boldness and persistence leads to Emma being branded an 'epistolary stalker' by Bergmann (2011: 69). Orit Kamir has interpreted the act of female stalking as a positive salute to the ancient image of Lilith from Jewish folklore. According to her account, while female stalking narratives are a 'risky outlet', they portray 'subversive undercurrents' in the patriarchal hegemony (2001: 5). To begin with, Emma identifies herself as the 'deserted outcast from society' who has nowhere to go (*MEC*: 74). She is a woman, Rebecca Stott believes, who:

Comes in many guises but [who] is always Other. She is always outside, either literally [...] or metaphorically, for as sexually fatal woman she represents chaos, darkness, death, all that lies beyond the safe, the known, and the normal' (1992: 37).

This echoes de Beauvoir's description of woman as the Other (see pages 5 and 6 above). Emma is motherless and has been passed around from relative to relative and feels that she doesn't really belong anywhere. Additionally, she is educated and is candid about her views on slavery, reason and education. She reveals that she is '*unhappy*', that her 'soul pants for something more, something higher!' (*MEC*: 86), a clear indication that she is miserable with her lot and is not content to remain inside the boundaries of restrictive femininity. She resents the fact that women, the so called, 'weak and timid', are expected to 'relinquish their pursuits' and remain 'half suppressed' (ibid.: 86-87).

The image of Lilith, and her 'ever-gazing presence' and 'uncanny returns' is said to be the earliest example of the female stalker in the West as she portrays women as 'subversive within the social order' (Kamir, 2001: 19-20). Emma pursues Harley wholeheartedly, and acknowledges that due to their suppression, her emotions have developed a 'savage tenacity [...] and, being forced back, return with additional violence' (*MEC*: 131). The potency of Emma's love and her stifled feelings are described as a 'destructive torrent' a 'pervading and a devouring fire' which drives her pursuit, but is perhaps too powerful for Harley and steers him away (*MEC*: 129). It could be argued that Harley's lack of

response to Emma's letters is due to an internal fear of her commanding and insubordinate character, perhaps the fear of 'Lilith's devilish image [which] terrifies men, causing them to fear undomesticated, non patriarchal women' (Kamir, 2001: 5).

Emma is unlike the other females in the novel as she questions her actions as a woman, asking 'Is it virtue, then, to combat, or to yield to, my passions?' (MEC: 118). Indeed, can a woman still be regarded as autonomous if she is at the mercy of every passionate impulse, sexual or otherwise? Ty states that Hays' novel is 'one of the most powerful critiques of patriarchy written at the time' and one in which Hays deconstructs the portrait of ideal womanhood (2009: xxxvi, xvii). As the Preface to the novel states, Hays intended to present Emma not as a 'fantastic model' of femininity but as a vulnerable individual 'loving virtue while enslaved by passion, liable to the mistakes and weaknesses of our fragile nature' (ibid.: 4).

Conversely, the antithesis of this argument concerns itself with much darker distinctions, ranging from the loss of identity to psycho-neurotic tendencies. An alternative reading of Emma's story may reveal elements that are not quite as subversive or 'proto-feminist' as the reader may have been led to believe. Emma subjects herself to ridicule through her tedious and constant entreaty of an impervious man, but in addition, her obsession turns quite sinister and invades her entire existence. These dark aspects can expose actual psychotic elements in individuals that appear 'to be linked to some pathological patterns that are not found with reciprocal love' (Baumeister and Wotman, 1992: 9). Emma's love can thus be interpreted as compulsive and irrational as much as it can be seen as persevering or valiant. She hounds Harley on many occasions with correspondence that bombard him with questions and suppositions as to why he does not return her love: 'Say to me, in clear and decisive terms, that the obstacles which oppose my affection *are absolutely, and altogether, insuperable* – Or that there is a possibility of their removal' (MEC: 125).

In an influential study of various categories of stalking, stalking proper has been defined as ‘a situation in which one individual imposes on another unwanted and fear-inducing intrusions in the form of communication or approaches’ (Mullen, Pathé and Purcell, 2000: 3, 135). The two categories of stalker most relevant here are those described as ‘intimacy seekers’ and ‘incompetent suitors’ who both persistently seek to establish relationships with their love objects and are oblivious to the responses from their victims (ibid.: 118-124). The intimacy seekers believe that nothing in life is as important as their pursuit of their target and they develop specific tactics to gain the attention of their love object, living in hope of the day that their affections will be returned (ibid.: 127-128). Emma exemplifies this in her assertion that she can ‘no longer afflict [her]self with the idea, that [her] peace, or welfare, are indifferent to [Harley]’ and she states that ‘He will, one day, know [her] value, and feel [her] loss’ (*MEC*: 98, 145). She describes her love obsession as a ‘delicious poison’, an ‘intoxicating draught’ which ‘had circulated through every vein in [her] heart’ (ibid.: 69, 72). Indeed, she claims that, ‘every hour, [she] imbibed, in large draughts, the deceitful poison of hope’ (ibid.: 75). Similar to the incompetent suitor, Emma appears normal but the way these stalker types force their claim that someone should court them reduces them to individuals with ‘poor social skills, over inflated egos and interpersonal insensitivity’ (Mullen, Pathé and Purcell, 2000: 127-128).

Emma refuses to accept Augustus’s indifference to her affections: ‘I do not believe you, for it is impossible that I should not be esteemed by one whom I so sincerely regard’ (*MEC*: 98). This persistent romantic infatuation, or ‘crazed obsessiveness’ and ‘self-annihilating abjection in the face of erotic rejection’ overtakes Emma and she is undoubtedly enslaved by her feelings (Taylor, 2003: 189). All she can do is await Harley’s responses, but they rarely come. Her correspondence is a repeated attempt to uncover a motive for his rejection and the reproaches of guilt she bestows upon him are a prime example of unwanted harassment by stalkers. When he does not reply to her letters, she criticizes him – ‘You should have written, in pity to the situation of my mind’ (*MEC*: 94) – and she endeavours to make him feel guilty for her broken heart: ‘I am willing to believe, that your conduct towards me has originated in good motives,

nevertheless, you have made some sad mistakes' (*MEC*: 106). Her harassment portrays her desperation, which leads only to unattractiveness and pushes Harley even further away.

As Baumeister and Wotman argue, the more a stalker pleads and grovels, the more ridiculous he or she becomes (1992: 103). The obsessive lover loses the respect of the rejecter, and 'ironically, the very acceptance of humiliation for the sake of love may further diminish the chances for realising that love' (*ibid.*). As de Beauvoir suggests 'She [woman] chooses to desire her enslavement so ardently that it will seem to her the expression of her liberty [...] she will humble herself to nothingness before him (1983: 653). Emma's tale of love can therefore be interpreted as a possible setback in respect of women's liberation since her desire for Harley becomes not only an obsession, but a loss of her own self. By concentrating on Harley and placing him above everything else, Emma's needs grow to be secondary to his. She is unaware of how much of herself she compromises in trying to gain his approval, but her life without him has no meaning. She takes no pleasure in her books or drawings any more, throwing them aside. She becomes restless and anxious, focusing only on Augustus:

I turned over my books, incapable of fixing my attention; [...] and throwing myself on the sofa, with folded arms, fixed my eyes on the picture of Augustus, which had lately been replaced, and sunk into waking dreams of ideal perfection and visionary bliss. I gazed on the lifeless features, engraven on my heart in colours yet more true and vivid.
(*MEC*: 84)

Her letters state that all her activities will be for his pleasure and benefit, her own pleasure, evidently, does not appear to matter. The very fact that she is concerned with the pursuit of Harley as a means to be close to him, proves that she has no interest in anything but Harley, which is far from emancipating. One letter states: 'I will [...] grieve in your griefs, enter with zeal into your concerns, interest myself in your honour and welfare, and endeavour, with all my little power, to contribute to your comfort and satisfaction' (*MEC*: 104).

De Beauvoir argues that woman ‘creates a hell for herself’ by trying to identify with the loved one, and wishing to experience life as her lover does (1983: 664):

The woman in love tries to see with his eyes; she reads the books he reads, prefers the pictures and the music he prefers; she is interested only in the landscapes she sees with him, in the ideas that come from him; she adopts his friendships, his enmities; his opinions; when she questions herself, it is his reply she tries to hear [...] she is another incarnation of her loved one, his reflection, his double: she is *he*. She lets her own world collapse in contingency, for she really lives in his. (ibid.: 663)

The stalker or obsessed lover ‘awakens the whole range of primitive emotions of the needy self and we find ourselves caught in a world of mirrors, looking in astonishment at the multiple selves that occupy our inner world’ (Sullivan, 2001: 100). De Beauvoir claims that ‘the narcissist finds it impossible to admit that others are not passionately interested in her’ (1983: 649) and ‘that what they seek in the imaginary lover is an apotheosis of their narcissism’ (ibid.: 648). Emma’s narcissism is evident in her childishness and immaturity; she has idealistic notions about love and life and her adoration for Harley is very similar to a ‘school girl crush’. As a child, Emma ‘sighed for a romance that would never end’ and happily re-enacted the part of ‘the valiant knight – the gentle damsel – the adventurous mariner – the daring robber – the courteous lover – and the airy coquet’ (*MEC*: 15). Her wild imagination has therefore built up an impression of what real love should be and so it is not surprising that she has made Harley fit with the imagined ideal that has been sculpted in her mind.

The concept of romance and unrequited love originated in the medieval courts of France in the eleventh and twelfth centuries with Troubadour and Trobairitz poets. (Hopkins, 1994: 10). Courtly love poetry was characterized by its celebration of idealized love which placed the beloved on a pedestal and transfixed the gaze of the admirer unexpectedly and indefinitely. The main feature however, was that it was unrequited and the admirer suffered. The more one suffered the more noble the love seemed. (ibid.: 21). Emma’s suffering heart, like that of the Troubadours and Trobairitz is repeatedly put on display in the novel. Sullivan states that such feelings ‘send us deep inside the caverns of our own

psyches' (2001: 100-101) and as victims of unrequited love, we feel helpless and vulnerable. Emma tells Augustus, 'my heart flutters – I breathe with difficulty' (*MEC*: 124) but his silence sends her deeper into disconsolateness, comparing her life to a 'stagnant lake' in a dark cold fissure that is not refreshed by the free flow of air. She descends into a state of sadness and vacancy:

I became weak, languid, enervated – my disorder was a lethargy of soul. This was gradually succeeded by disease of body: – an inactivity, so contrary to all the habits of my past life, generated morbid humours, and brought on a slow, remitting, fever. (*MEC*: 149)

Her love is described as an 'insanity' (*MEC*: 138), and 'moon-struck madness' (*MEC*: 139) which equates with de Beauvoir's assertion that for a woman in this position, 'there is no other way out for her than to lose herself, body and soul, in him who is represented to her as the absolute, as the essential' (1983: 653). In losing her sanity or the ability to think rationally, it could be argued that she gets further away from becoming an autonomous woman.

Harley does not appear in the novel as an actual person until chapter nineteen. Prior to this, he is portrayed solely through descriptions via Emma's cousin and Mrs Harley, the mother who dotes upon him as 'the darling and the pride of her heart' (*MEC*: 54). Emma's initial knowledge of Harley is therefore obtained through other people on whom he has had an impact. An individual's judgement of another is usually the consequence of an impression gained from 'first evidence and impressions' (Baumeister and Wotman, 1992: 166). According to her cousin, Emma 'would, infallibly, lose [her] heart' to Harley, who is so much 'more' than Mr Montague and this, evidently 'play[s] in [Emma's] fancy' (*MEC*: 53). The hanging portrait of Harley also contributes to her impression of him as a supreme being, a demi-god. She states:

I accustomed myself to gaze on this resemblance of a man, in whose character I felt so lively an interest, till, I fancied, I read in the features all the qualities imputed to the original by a tender and partial parent. (*MEC*: 59)

As a result, she falls in love with a man whom she has not even met. She admires and aspires to an image and is left in an indeterminate state for much of the text:

I was compelled to acknowledge, to myself, that solitude, the absence of other impressions, the previous circumstances that had operated on my character, my friendship for Mrs Harley, and her eloquent, affectionate, reiterated, praises of her son, had combined to awaken all the exquisite, though dormant, sensibilities of my nature; and, however romantic it might appear to others, and did appear even to myself, I felt, that I loved an ideal object (for such was Augustus Harley to me). (*MEC*: 60)

Roy Baumeister and Sara Wotman explain that one of the reasons for unrequited love is the disparity in desirability, which they have called ‘falling upwards’ (1992: 48). In *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, Harley has the upper hand from the start as Emma has identified him as somebody superior and is, therefore, in her eyes, his subordinate. Because women during the eighteenth century were taught that they were inferior to men, it is no wonder that Emma places all her desires, her aspirations and reason for existence in a man. Emma is simply the victim of a system that dictates her fate but one which then criticizes her for it. Emma admits that the ‘esteem and reverence’ she feels for Harley has developed from reports of his ‘worth and high qualities’ steadily being ‘interwoven with every fibre of [her] heart’ (*MEC*: 80). As individuals, according to Baumeister and Wotman, people tend to fall in love with those who are of a higher status than themselves, either in looks or social position and thus the odds of the love being returned are likely to be low (1992: 48). Due to this proposed pattern in how individuals fall in love, there will already be an issue of imbalance between the two people concerned but Emma clearly sees her ideal self through Harley and is disappointed when Harley only reciprocates her love in a brotherly manner. Her actions seem to lead to him withdrawing his love altogether.

According to Freud ‘we are never so defenceless against suffering as when we love, never so helplessly unhappy as when we have lost our loved object or its love’ (1961: 82). The strong desire for agency and power in obsessive love is connected to the inability to attain the love object and everything one sacrifices to have it. Arguably, Emma wants Harley simply because he is unobtainable and this is symbolic of all the other obstacles in Emma’s life as a woman (Dart, 2003:101).

He has access to a life completely forbidden to her and so her obsession with him is twofold: it satisfies her conscious fantasy of freedom from patriarchal norms, and her unconscious erotic fantasies. Harley becomes 'the heroic territory she longs to occupy' (Sullivan, 2001: 37). The student/ teacher bond that develops between them is further testimony to Harley's upper hand advantage which leaves Emma in a state of wonder and awe but also in a state of 'deep and habitual depression [which] preyed upon [her] spirits' (*MEC*: 97).

The conclusion of Emma's tale has been condemned by both modern and eighteenth-century critics since the events that transpire within the last few chapters of the novel are highly unlikely (Ty, 2009: xxix): Emma's marriage to Mr Montague, her fleeting encounter with Harley who then dies in her own home, the discovery of her husband's adultery and his ensuing suicide, are all believed to be rather artificial and very dubious (*ibid.*). The deaths of both Montague and Harley leave Emma to single-handedly raise two small children as a widow. However, Emma's new situation may not necessarily be a turn for the worse and as previously noted, it is quite possible that the author intentionally inscribes this fate for Emma.

Karen Bloom Gevirtz points out that women were afforded much more autonomy as widows since they were no longer subjected to the control of their husbands thus they enjoyed advantages similar to men (2005: 14-15). This 'unique' position, she argues, enabled a widow to own property after the death of her husband, manage a household and control the family's finances, as well as making decisions for herself and her children, all under the protection of the English legal system (*ibid.*). Emma is left £10,000 after Montague dies, £5,000 of which is bequeathed to their daughter, but as Emma notes, 'the remainder [is] left to my disposal', and this means that she is able to adopt Augustus junior (*MEC*: 192). Additionally, a widow's position was unclear since she was no longer bound by conjugal duties but was knowledgeable and experienced in sexual matters, making her exempt from the usual paradigms. If she was lucky enough to

acquire wealth and not fall into debt and poverty, the widow had the possibility of becoming a self-governing, independent woman. The situation is highlighted by the author of an article in *The London Magazine*:

A widow is a woman, who, having been freed from the restraint of a single life by matrimony is delivered from the shackles of a married life by the death of her husband. Thrice happy being! Who canst obey the call of pleasure, without following the train of a chaperone: who canst open thy doors to the flatterer and the beau without scandal, who, at the same moment, mayest enjoy all the freedom of the married life, and receive all the homage of the virgin state! (anon, 1777 in Kimber and Kimber, 1908: 134)

Emma states that she will undertake full responsibility for the education of Augustus junior. Her daughter (also named Emma), and the young Augustus had, from ‘the same masters, the same lessons’ until they were twelve years of age and the young Emma often ‘outstripped [Augustus junior’s] progress’ (MEC: 193). This demonstrates Emma’s independent will to provide both children with an equal education regardless of their gender. This type of autonomy, where some women were choosing what to do for themselves and their children, provoked social anxiety as Barbara Todd highlights, because it ‘contradicted the patriarchal theory’ which expected men to be the rulers of the household as well as the state (1985: 55). The usual principles therefore, did not apply to widows, who were now free from patriarchal rule. Because of this, widows were perceived as ‘a threat to the social order’ as they could do as they wished and were sometimes considered transgressive individuals (ibid.).

Consequently, the image of the widow was often satirised as a figure of ridicule and branded as either the lusty or forlorn old woman in literature (Rousseau, 1991: 164-165, Gevirtz, 2005: 15-17, Kehler, 2009: 15). One of the earliest satirical depictions of the widow can be seen in *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387), in which Geoffrey Chaucer sets up the re-marrying wife of Bath as an ambitious, lascivious widow, who ‘never ever loved in moderation/But always followed [her] own appetite’ (1387/1986: 234). Five husbands later, the wife of Bath shows no sign of deceleration: ‘Here’s to the sixth, whenever he turns up’ she declares (ibid.: 220). She asserts that there is ‘no shame’ in remarrying for she must utilise her ‘gadget’ as God intended, to make her husband both ‘debtor’ and

‘slave’ (ibid.: 221- 223). She laughs when she recalls how ‘cruelly [she] made them sweat at night’ and confesses: ‘it meant nothing to me/They’d given me their land and property/ I’d no more need to be assiduous’ (ibid.: 223-224). Chaucer’s use of hyperbole and parody to highlight the wife of Bath’s economic and personal situation raises questions as to whether he perpetuates or deconstructs the myths associated with widowhood. While he may be less hostile than his contemporaries, his caricatured widow reveals an uncertainty towards autonomous and independent women of this kind (Gevirtz, 2005: 15).

In reality, as the article in *The London Magazine* demonstrates, widowhood was considered a desirable position, at least for the majority of women, as it offered them more liberty in contrast to that given to wives, spinsters or old maids. Emma ultimately triumphs as she becomes the sovereign of her own self, household and children. Since she is no longer surrounded by males, there are fewer obstacles for her and she is less likely to be affected by the plethora of labels even though the widow continued to be a ‘subject for comedy’ (Todd, 1985: 54). The necessity to categorize women by means of contradictory labels is one of the many themes that Mary Elizabeth Braddon explores in her novel *Aurora Floyd* (1863), the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Three

The ‘Divine-Demonic’ Aurora: Representations of the Angel and the Demon in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Aurora Floyd* (1863)

Everyone can see what you appear to be, whereas few have direct experience of what you really are; and those few will not dare to challenge the popular view. (Niccoló Machiavelli, 1513/1988: 63)

Mary Elizabeth Braddon has been hailed by Lynne Pykett as the ‘doyenne (or demon)’ of sensation fiction (2011: 123-125), because her work dominated a genre which became a literary phenomenon in the middle to late nineteenth century. Born in 1835 to an Irish mother and English father who separated when she was only four, Braddon had a rather nomadic upbringing with her mother, and the two had a remarkably close bond (Pykett, 2011: 124). She began her writing at the age of eight. A love of classic literature had been fuelled by her mother’s enthusiasm for writers such as Shakespeare and Scott, and her acquaintance with the popular fiction of the day had been brought about by her mother’s cook (Pykett, 2011: 124). By the age of twenty one, Braddon’s passion for the stage resulted in her acting debut in a London theatre (ibid.: 125) but she eventually turned her talents to fiction writing. Her previous career as an actress however made her a target of disparagement when she became an author (ibid.: 130) because actresses had a notorious reputation for using the stage to attract rich suitors, gain social mobility and induce sexual intercourse backstage (Lancia, 2005: 131).

Braddon’s popularity with both the upper and working classes began in the 1860s when she began writing for weekly penny magazines and later for John Maxwell’s magazine *The Welcome Guest*. Maxwell arranged a literary apprenticeship for Braddon with the *St James’s Magazine* and the two eventually began an adulterous love affair which resulted in six children (Pykett, 2011: 125). Maxwell’s wife had been committed to an asylum in Dublin while he and

Braddon openly co-habited. Braddon raised her own children as well as raising the children from Maxwell's marriage, and 'kept him solvent by the labour of her pen' (Fahnestock, 1981: 55). When his wife died in 1872, Maxwell married Braddon (Pykett, 2011: 125). Braddon died in 1915.

Although she was an actress, playwright, short story writer and novelist of different genres and forms, Braddon was primarily an author of sensation novels which she published throughout most of the 1880s (ibid.: 123). She was publishing at least two serials a year by the end of the 1890s, and even at the start of her career in the 1860s she had no less than five different serials in various magazines (Pykett: 2011: 125). She cleverly employed her own knowledge and life experience of what it meant to be an outsider on the outskirts of society, and fused this together with the decadent plotlines of her earlier stories in penny dreadfuls such as *The Halfpenny Journal* and *Sixpenny Magazine* (Wynne, 2001: 116, Snodgrass, 2005: 36).

Sensation fiction included tales of murder and bigamy, secrecy and scandal, contrasting with the perception of the safe haven of Victorian domesticity. Unlike gothic or supernatural thrillers which dealt with danger outside the domestic sphere, the sensation novel suggested that decay and degeneration was just as likely to be found inside the home and indeed within ourselves (Hughes, 1980: 16). In their day, mass-produced sensation novels were assigned a contradictory status of 'being feminine in structure on one hand yet unfeminine, or, in its extreme, anti-feminine, according to gender expectations' (Pykett: 1992: 33).

Though it is perhaps less celebrated than Braddon's 1861 novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, the three volume novel *Aurora Floyd*, published in 1863, was just as popular, if not more lucrative for the author (Pykett, 1992: 6-7). This popularity was maintained in spite of the hostility of contemporary reviews which criticized the sensation genre for highlighting crimes of immorality, sex and desire, specifically female desire. Writing for Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine*, Margaret Oliphant lamented that instead of being attracted by the knight of old romances who rescues a maiden on his horse, the woman reader 'waits now for

flesh and muscles for strong arms that seize her and warm breath that thrills her through, and a host of other physical attractions' (1867: 258 -259). A reviewer for *The Christian Remembrancer* wrote that:

There is nothing more violently opposed to our moral sense, in all the contradictions to custom which they represent to us, than the utter unrestraint in which the heroines of this order are allowed to expatiate and develop their impulsive, stormy, passionate characters. (anon, 1864: 212)

Aurora Floyd is a prime example of what these critics were objecting to. It tells the story of the beautiful, feisty daughter of a deceased stage actress and rich banker. While aged seventeen, Aurora becomes infatuated with her father's stable groom, the handsome young James Conyers. Her father sends her to school in Paris and sacks Conyers. However Conyers follows Aurora to Paris, and the two elope together. When Aurora realizes that Conyers is only after her fortune, she returns home to her loving father, having been away for a year. Before long, Captain Talbot Bulstrode and John Mellish have both fallen in love with Aurora, whom Matthew Harrison describes as 'a stunner [...] one of your regular spitfires, that'll knock you into the middle of next week if you so much as ask her how she does in a manner she don't approve of' (AF: 323). Aurora harbours a dark secret, which is that she had married Conyers in France, and this unfolds as the novel progresses. Her secretive behaviour, enigmatic social comportment and erratic outbursts which are spurred on by her past, only provoke the men's attraction towards her. Believing (mistakenly) that Conyers is dead, she finally agrees to marry Mellish. When a new groom (who turns out to be Conyers) is found murdered on Mellish's country estate, the truth about Aurora's bigamous past becomes known and she runs away. Despite her reputation as a dangerous, uncontrollable woman, Mellish professes his loyalty and undying love for Aurora and asks her to marry him once more, this time legitimately, allowing for a 'happily ever after' end to the story.

Aurora's bigamy is a central theme in *Aurora Floyd*, but it is merely a vehicle allowing an exploration of deeper anxieties and concealed desires which were considered taboo in Victorian society. While the Victorians endeavoured to maintain an ideology of the family as the key institution in society, they also

secretly enjoyed the fantasy of possessing another spouse (Fahnestock, 1981: 47). The Victorian home as the portrait of perfection was simply a farce. As Kate Flint notes, 'to lift the veil is to peep at the forbidden, to access taboo knowledge; to occupy, by connotation, a masculine, even a godlike position' (2000: 95). Even though the complexities of the marriage laws in England, Scotland and Ireland during the nineteenth century meant that it was possible to have wives in each country and still remain within the law, bigamy was a major problem; no fewer than 884 cases of bigamy were tried in England between the years 1853 and 1863. Fiction which referenced bigamy was, according to Jeanne Fahnestock, a specific reaction to an extraordinary moment in history (1981: 58, 71).

According to Victorian ideology, daughters were regarded as the 'sheltered flower' who adorned the family home and helped to maintain it as a place of refuge (Gorham, 1982: 11). Since they were not expected to leave the domestic sphere, daughters were denied any knowledge about the world outside the home and were consequently raised from birth to answer to, and accept protection from, their father in the first instance, and their husband in the second (ibid.). Additionally, the necessity to control sexual pleasure and place it firmly within its marital setting was also part of the patriarchal ideology of women as pure and virtuous beings, little short of angels (Kingsley-Kent, 1999: 179). As Virginia Woolf notes, 'the Angel in the house was the ideal of womanhood created by the imaginations of men and women at a certain stage of their pilgrimage to lure them across a very dusty stretch' (1978: xxx).

Of course, the boundary line between angel and whore (demon) could 'only be crossed once and in one direction' (Herbert, 2004: 71), resulting in a completely contradictory dichotomy which defined women through sex. Therefore, there was a great deal of pressure on women to live up to an impossible ideology which condemned them as 'helplessly nymphomaniacal' fallen women if they failed to achieve what was expected of the 'sexually comatose' angel in the house (Kingsley-Kent, 1999: 180). Because Aurora had run off with her father's groom and presumably had sexual relations with him before they married, she would technically have been subject to the status of a fallen woman and,

accordingly, whore. This is the reason for the extreme lengths to which Aurora goes to protect her secret. Only men were excused for their sexual escapades and allowed to inhabit the public sphere. They alone could exert power, display aggression and be independent; it was no place for the respectable woman (ibid.). As Simone de Beauvoir explains, the 'concrete powers' of patriarchy were arranged against woman to ensure her dependence; the 'codes of law' were organized in such a way as to establish woman as occupying a marginal position, that of the 'Other' (1983: 171).

Since Victorian writers such as Braddon and George Eliot co-habited with their partners out of wedlock and were regarded as scandalous for doing so, their own 'experiences of marginality' allowed for greater expression of 'forbidden' sexual desire within their work as they were not confined to traditional mores (Wynne, 2001: 118). This demonstrates Moi's theory (see Introduction) that women who violate social codes are expected to occupy marginal positions in society. These authors' peripheral locus offered an alternative to the more 'ladylike' literature by writers such as Jane Austen for example, thereby revolutionising female literature (Wynne, 2001: 118). Ironically it was Braddon's own 'fallen' status that catapulted her to literary fame. The sensation novel allowed women writers the opportunity to remain on the boundary lines but to express their 'covert anger' at the domestic restrictions placed upon them, and communicate the suppressed emotions of 'the limitations of their social and domestic circumstance' (Pykett, 1992: 49).

Aurora's 'Otherness', or outsider status is alluded to initially through the insubordination of her mother, Eliza. The narrator explains how Eliza, an actress of lower class origins, was despised 'above all, for her insolence' as she paid no particular respect to the 'county families' who were higher on the social scale (AF: 9). These individuals occupied an unequivocal, established position within the social order and did not accept Eliza as one of them. Stott argues that Eliza's status 'is a multiple sign singularized by her position of Otherness: outside, invading, abnormal, subnormal' (1992: 38). This is apparent through her consignment to the outer edges as an 'adventuress' who refuses to eat 'the ample

dish of humble pie which these county families were prepared to set before her', nor lick 'the dust from their aristocratic shoes, [court] their patronage, and [submit] to be "'taken up" by them' (*AF*: 9). Because of Eliza's modest background as a working class actress, Aurora is regarded by socially superior neighbours as having inherited a stain on her character, which means that she too is singled out as a target and a dweller in the slippery terrain of Otherness (Tromp, 2000: 120). The narrator tells us that from an early age, Aurora 'evinced a very decided tendency to become what is called "fast"' (*AF*: 18). At the age of six, she refuses to play with dolls, preferring instead, a rocking horse (*ibid.*). By the time she is ten, she is familiar with racing terminology, subsequently placing her first racing bet on a Derby race by the age of twelve (*ibid.*). Her cousin Andrew is a member of the Croydon hunt and having acquired the freedom of riding, she accompanies him across country at thirteen. It is no secret to Archibald Floyd that his daughter 'spent half her time on horseback' and the members of the upper circle 'were not slow to say that Aurora was her mother's own daughter' (*ibid.*: 18).

As Pykett argues, the position of women on this 'cultural borderline' is 'shifting and ambivalent', and one which Aurora epitomizes (1992: 32). While Aurora inherited her mother's affectionate and kind-hearted nature, she also has a 'touch of native fire blended into her mould that stamped her as original' (*AF*: 17). She is thus portrayed from the outset as a girl who prefers the unladylike pursuits of horse riding and betting, establishing a position for herself somewhere between a respectable and scandalous identity. This may be Aurora's way of rejecting the strict Victorian morals that are imposed on her as a child.

Aurora also flouts convention by forming 'a kind of intimacy' with her father's groom Conyers (*AF*: 296). His 'handsome' face is the 'perfection of physical beauty' [...], whose every line is 'measured by the sculptor's rule, and carved by the sculptor's chisel' (*ibid.*: 151). The incessant reference to his good looks and 'swagger' indicate just how irresistible this 'dashing fellow' must have appeared to such a young, inexperienced girl (*ibid.*: 150). Aurora admits to feeling 'no romantic, overwhelming love' for this 'male Aphrodite', and therefore it must

be assumed that her desire for Conyers is sexual (ibid.: 295, 155). Upon Aurora's return to the house after a six hour absence with Conyers, Archibald chastises his daughter for the ill-use of her horse: 'A six hours' ride is neither good for her nor for you' (ibid.: 20). While it is not elaborated on within the text, it is safe to presume that Aurora was not riding the horse for the full six hours and that she and Conyers had engaged in sexual intercourse.

Later in the novel, Aurora looks back at her youthful escapade with regret, referring to it as 'the folly of [her] youth', 'the mistake of [her] girlhood' and a 'mad and wicked thing' which brought 'shame and grief upon [her] father' (AF.: 192, 296). Retrospectively, she describes her adventure with Conyers as a 'school-girl's sentimental fancy' which seems to overtake her, but at the time, Aurora is stupefied by this 'prince in disguise' whom she and her governess have romanticized (ibid.: 295-296). Archibald considers this man unworthy, which leads to an angry confrontation between him and Aurora before she is sent away. She reproaches her father for his 'illiberality' and reminds him of her own 'very humble origin' (ibid.: 296). This reminds readers of a man's freedom versus that of a woman in the symbolic order. Archibald chose to marry Eliza but Aurora is not allowed the same liberty. When she returns from France, she laments about the limitations placed on women, especially it could be argued, women of her class, who are left little space for movement:

What is the use of this big world, if we are to stop for ever in one place, chained to one set of ideas, fettered to one narrow circle of people, seeing and hearing of the persons we hate for ever and ever, and unable to get away from the odious sound of their names?. (AF: 45)

Further proof of Aurora's defiance can be seen when she asks her father for money. When Archibald asks why, she replies: 'Never mind that, papa. It is my money is it not; and I may spend it as I please?' (ibid.: 191). Similarly, when Mellish probes her about 'money matters', Aurora replies: 'perhaps I may prefer to spend my own money [...] and pay any foolish bets I have chosen to make out of my own purse, without being under any obligation to anyone' (ibid.: 186). It is clear that Aurora 'said what she pleased; thought, spoke, acted as she pleased' without fear of offending or upsetting anyone (ibid.: 17). Braddon plays up to

stereotypes by painting the brunette Aurora as an audacious, brazen faced young lady who, for example, 'hate[s] England' as much as France and is daring enough to express her abhorrence of the Parisian finishing school (ibid.: 45). The narrator comments that apparently, like other young women who have 'black eyes and blue-black hair, Miss Floyd was a hater' (*AF*: 22).

Aurora's cousin Lucy, on the other hand, is described as a 'fair-faced, blue-eyed, rosy-lipped, golden-haired little girl' blessed with 'delicacy of outline, perfection of feature, purity of tint' (ibid.: 19, 41). Bulstrode thinks Lucy is just 'the sort of woman to make a good wife' as she had been blessed with 'purity and goodness' since birth (ibid.: 41). What is interesting is the way in which Braddon overturns the stereotype of the dark lady of the sensation novel by revealing at the end Aurora's innocence of the murder everyone thinks she has committed. Braddon, it could be argued, challenges the conventional order which posits women at opposite ends of the social scale, highlighting the façade of the Victorian home and the double standards of the women who are expected to adorn it.

As Marlene Tromp states, sensation novels often had at their core an aggressive, seductive, mysterious and treacherous female, who exposed the contradictions and hypocrisies within the domestic sphere and mocked the ideology of the angel/demon dichotomy (2000: 141). Ironically, the intense depiction of Aurora's character as the 'dark, mysterious, potentially dangerous, sexual woman' (Tatum, 2007: 510) with a 'fast lady' exterior (Robinson, 2011: 161), results in 'the paradoxical effect of portraying the culture's demon, the masculini[z]ed "unwomanly" woman, as the desirable and desired feminine' (Pykett, 1992: 88). Indeed, the more Bulstrode 'argued with himself upon the folly of loving her, so much the more surely did his love increase' (*AF*: 47). Aurora's unconventional character therefore shows her as a woman whose personal autonomy excites, as it transcends the conventional Victorian social order. By setting up Aurora as a defiant, non-conforming female who rejects

proper Victorian femininity and presumably has ‘unholy’ sexual intercourse for pleasure, Braddon, according to Winifred Hughes, characterizes the ‘femme fatale as heroine’ (1980: 128), instead of the traditional blonde, epitomized by Lucy.

The femme fatale became a personification of the rising fears about class and gender role changeability within the nineteenth century. This dangerous woman exemplified cultural anxieties relating to insanity, disease and foreign invasion, but mostly, she exemplified fears about sex, including prostitution and pornography, which began to appear in literary works of the time (Braun, 2012: 2). The femme fatale is not like the victimized fallen woman or domesticated submissive woman of literature however because the femme fatale ‘scares, threatens, but never wearies the reader, arousing an increased curiosity about her, to untangle her mystery, to have power over her, as she becomes more of an enigma’ (Hedgecock, 2008: 2). For example, Bulstrode watches Aurora to see if he could penetrate behind ‘that gloomy veil which sometimes spread itself over her handsome face’ (*AF*: 37). As Jennifer Hedgecock argues, the femme fatale ‘resorts to desperate measures that include adultery, bigamy and murder’ to get the point across that she is a self-empowering human being, but it is the men becoming detectives, trying to decipher the femme fatale’s ‘hidden secrets of feminine sexuality’ who threaten the dominant social order (2008: 12). Bulstrode asks for example, ‘what was the dark secret of this young creature’s life?’ (*AF*: 87), and Mellish tussles in ‘cruel anguish’ with the ‘twin demons in his soul’; ‘doubt and despair’ to try and determine, ‘What, in the name of Heaven’, [...] this secret [could] be?’ (*AF*: 87).

Aurora’s sexual energy and mystery are most visible in the whipping scene in which she thrashes Steeve Hargreaves (the ‘Softy’) for kicking her dog, an action which ‘radically deviates from the accepted standards of womanly behaviour’ (Tromp, 2000: 112). In this scene, Aurora is portrayed with ‘a heavily sexuali[z]ed word-painting’ which is not unusual in Braddon’s novels (Pykett, 1992: 100):

Aurora sprang upon him like a beautiful tigress, and catching the collar of his fustian jacket in her slight hands, rooted him to the spot upon which he stood [...] her cheeks white with rage, her eyes flashing fury, her hat fallen off, and her black hair tumbling about her shoulders, sublime in her passion. (*AF*: 116).

Pykett argues that women who are ‘threateningly sexual’ are often portrayed as fiends or wild animals (1992: 16), which concurs with Lucy Bland’s assertion of the inner ‘beast’ within (1995: xiii). Bland argues that when the beast comes to the surface it disrupts society and becomes an insubordinate menace to the family unit (1995: xiii). Like an animal, Aurora is ‘pervaded by feeling; knowing; self-assertive; desiring and actively pleasure seeking; pursuing self-fulfilment and self-identity; independent; enslaver; and victimi[z]er or predator’ (Pykett: 1992:16). Beneath the smokescreen of perfect Victorian womanliness, according to Bland, a hidden creature lay waiting within every individual (Bland, 1995: xiii) and along with crime or other evils, threatened nineteenth-century society at every turn, intensifying the fear of ‘a full scale invasion of the middle-class domestic paradise’ (Hughes, 1980: 44). The idea that women could violate gender codes and act in such an unfeminine manner (Robinson, 2011: 165) was both immoral and shocking for Victorians who had come to believe in Doctor Acton’s prevailing theory that ‘sexual feeling within the female [was] in abeyance’, and when compared to males, was virtually non-existent (1867: 144).

Whilst Aurora is described as primal, the passage above, which references Aurora as a ‘beautiful tigress’ (*AF*: 116) also portrays Aurora as a beautifully enticing creature, with reference to her fierce, immobilising eyes and medusa-like hair (Tromp, 2000: 126). Incidentally, later in the novel, a further association is made between Aurora’s sexuality and the mythical medusa as Aurora naps on a sofa with ‘masses of ebon hair uncoiled and falling about her shoulders in serpentine tresses’ which resemble ‘blue-black snakes released from poor Medusa’s head’ (*AF*: 227). In this instance the snakes do not pose a threat since they seek the ‘folds of her garments’, thus Aurora’s ‘auto-erotic’ sexuality, according to Pykett is self-contained since she is asleep. Nonetheless, she is painted on several occasions as an ‘object of erotic desire’ (1994: 58). Much like the sofa scene, the whipping incident presents Aurora as a woman who radiates a

powerful sexual aura. Her passion is so extreme when she thrashes Hargreaves that her 'tangled hair had fallen to her waist [...] and the whip was broken in half-a-dozen-places' (*AF*: 116). She is 'idealised', according to Steven Marcus, 'in [her] feminine wrath' as she is supplied with 'detachable appendages', and is 'superbly scornful' with her 'symbolic phallus' in hand (2009: 258). Extricating her arm from Hargreaves, and deluging 'a shower of blows upon his clumsy shoulders with her slender whip [...] like a rod of flexible steel' she unleashes a torrent of suppressed rage (*AF*: 116).

Unlike the feminine ideal, by which women should exhibit self-control and restraint, Aurora, it could be argued, releases a mass of sexual tension. The whipping scene can be linked to the 'vast' amount of Victorian pornographic literature being published at the time, in which the flagellation fantasy was a large focus; since roles were interchangeable, it allowed a 'blurring' of sexual distinctions (Marcus, 2009: 252, 257). According to Marcus, the 'accused' (i.e. the one who is to be beaten) is nearly always male and the accuser is an 'immense female figure [who] swells up with anger and excitement; her eyes sparkle; her bosom heaves; her brawny yet dazzling white arm twitches' while she takes up a birch or rod in preparation (*ibid.*: 256). The whip is used to thrash the accused, an act which is said to produce 'unalloyed pleasure' to both parties (*ibid.*: 257). Pornographic literature of this kind is therefore said to be empowering for the reader as there is a certain amount of play-acting involved, where 'anybody can be or become anybody else' (*ibid.*), much like the use of masquerade (Chapter One). In this instance, Aurora assumes the position of a male patriarchal figure by disciplining Hargreaves, who becomes 'feminine in relation to her' (*ibid.*: 260). Thus, the sensation novel creates a space for women to explore alternatives to their circumscribed role, as it taps into the female psyche of 'satisfying fantasies of protest and escape' (Showalter, 1984: 158-159).

Of course, while Aurora's passionate exhibition toward Hargreaves departs drastically from the customary patterns of Victorian femininity, it might be argued that she is depicted as a kind of savage who needs to be restrained and cultivated, therefore constructing her as an object of men to be 'colonised'

(Tromp, 2000: 122). Mellish resumes the power when he rebukes Aurora for whipping Hargreaves and sends her away like a child, a direct reminder of her inferior position in the social order and public sphere (Gorham, 1982: 6). He tells Aurora, 'You should not have done this', informing Hargreaves, that 'it wasn't Mrs Mellish's business to horsewhip [him]' (AF: 117). By using his much bigger whip to beat Hargreaves, he 'symbolically re-appropriate[s] the authority Aurora had demonstrated [...] significantly storing this overtly phallic weapon in his pants' (Tromp, 2000: 113). As de Beauvoir argues, woman 'must renounce her claim as sovereign subject' (1983: 691-692) and so, Aurora must step down in order for Mellish to be re-instated as the so-called rightful ruler of the family unit.

All through the novel, Aurora is portrayed through the male gaze although, in comparison to the heroine of *Fantomina* (see Chapter One), the form in which Aurora is presented is what Pykett calls 'doubly voyeuristic' since readers are typically required to 'watch someone watching Aurora' (1994: 57). This is especially true of Bulstrode. When this 'scientific' man who 'neither smoked, drank, nor gambled' initially beholds Aurora he describes her as 'imperiously beautiful' and 'intoxicatingly brilliant' (AF: 27, 29). The logic and reason of his character does not prepare him for the whirlwind that is Aurora Floyd, whom he compares to the alcoholic beverage '*bang*' which is said to make 'the men who drank it half mad' (ibid.). Bulstrode believes that 'the beauty of this woman was like the strength of that alcoholic preparation; barbarous, intoxicating, dangerous, and maddening' (ibid.). From Bulstrode's perspective, Aurora is a seducer of men, according to Tromp who 'contaminates him with the poison of her Otherness', which warps his logic and modifies his identity as an Englishman (2000: 123). Aurora represents something he desires, yet fears because of the threat she poses to his existence.

Through her sexuality, the femme fatale may be capable of destroying the logic and reason of the dominant sex, and consequently, reign over him. All the representations of Aurora are images received through a patriarchal lens because that is how she is delivered. So ironically, when a female reads a sensation novel, she risks putting herself in the precarious position of viewing herself through the

male gaze too, as a 'power of horror', which implies her participation in a 'sort of masochism' (Tatum, 2007: 511). Bulstrode 'demonizes' and 'eroticizes Aurora' simultaneously (ibid.: 123), likening her to Cleopatra and Lola Montes (AF: 40). This calls to mind de Beauvoir's assertion that men are powerless in the face of women who they often see as tempting nymphs:

Woman is the siren whose song lures sailors upon the rocks; she is Circe, who changes her lovers into beasts, the undine who draws fishermen into the depths of pools. The man captivated by her charms no longer has will-power, enterprise, future, he is no longer a citizen, but mere flesh enslaved to its desires, cut off from the community, bound to the moment, tossed passively back and forth between torture and pleasure. (1983: 197)

As de Beauvoir claims, men may be attracted to the image of the Other because they desire women to correspond to a fantasy that they have dreamt up, different from anything they can imagine, yet who remain under their control (1983: 674-675). Bulstrode has constructed a fantasy in his mind, which stirs him from his unwavering, albeit mundane existence and takes over his thoughts. Aurora is completely unaware of the effect she has on Bulstrode, whose sentiments alternate between indignation and veneration for this stunningly impulsive 'divine-demonic' creature who, in reality is harmless (Tromp, 2000: 36). As Karen Horney argues, 'always everywhere the man strives to rid himself of his dread of women by objectifying it into "a beast of prey, a vampire, a witch, insatiable in her desires"' (1932: 349). Talbot Bulstrode represents a typical Victorian male who views Aurora as the 'very personification of what is "sinister"' (ibid.). However, the wild woman is simply not as evil and dreadful as she is constructed. While Aurora is created as an outsider, Braddon reveals Aurora's evil as merely the result of Bulstrode's imagination, perhaps highlighting his own insecurities. Interestingly and appropriate to *Aurora Floyd*, Heather Braun wonders whether the fate of the femme fatale is 'the result of her unconscious allure, her own malicious plotting, or the impossible ideals of her victims' (2012: 3).

Where Bulstrode sees Aurora as a seductive fiend, Mellish, the 'transparent, boyish, babyish good fellow' is no better, viewing her as the perfect angel (AF: 78). Aurora is to Mellish what Lucy is to Bulstrode. Mellish's

perception of Aurora is romantic and naive, seeing her 'bright face' through 'a mist, that blurred and distorted' his vision (ibid.: 76). His Aurora could never be involved in a sexual escapade with Conyers. The narrator speaks of Mellish's background, asking 'Is there anything, after all, so grand as a pure and unsullied life – a fair picture, with no ugly shadows lurking in the background?' (ibid.: 51), which is a reference to his idealistic notions of Aurora and her past. He sees her through his own quixotic standards, believing that anything 'she did or said was charming, bewitching and wonderful' (ibid.: 120). By asking if Aurora will allow him to 'worship' her as he pledges to 'lay [his] life at [her] feet' (ibid.: 104, 105), Mellish puts Aurora on a pedestal, not unlike the way her father does, and she becomes the divine 'angel in the house' character. As a result, Mellish becomes 'truly henpecked' (ibid.: 120). Aurora marries him because she feels a genuine gratitude towards him for having accepted her secret without questioning her, but when Mellish is reminded that he is a good husband, he replies that he is not worthy of Aurora (*AF*: 165). He continues by saying that he would even let Aurora, whom he has nicknamed 'Lolly', 'set [the] house on fire, for the pleasure of making a bonfire' (ibid.: 165, 225).

However, although Mellish states that he cannot 'bear to impute even the shadow of evil to her' (ibid.: 265) he endeavours to reign over Aurora, whom he often infantilizes and speaks for in an insensitive form of 'ventriloquism' (Davies, 2012: 9). Aurora's voice, or rather, lack of voice, quite often transmits itself through her husband. One example is when Mellish probes Aurora for her association with Conyers whom Aurora states is her father's ex-employee, recoiling from the conversation. She is unwilling to divulge any information about her past but even here, but Mellish is unable to imagine that Aurora could be guilty of anything. When Mellish fires more questions Aurora replies with the following curt replies, 'Yes John' and 'He does' (*AF*: 147) but remains silent for the most part, allowing Mellish to simply make assumptions about the matter. Aurora can do no more than bear her 'silent burden' (ibid.: 102) and Mellish uses her own weakness against her, albeit unconsciously. The two word answers feed Mellish's ego but her silence also results in her further subordination since she knows she is unable to express the truth without being judged.

At one point the narrator comments, ‘heaven knows what Aurora herself felt [...] Heaven only knows the bitterness of the silent battle’ (AF: 99). Readers are rarely given any insight into Aurora’s inner character via her own voice or feelings. Aurora is often seen but not heard, like a child, left to ponder her own thoughts, with ‘a certain gloomy shade’ which ‘steal[s] over her countenance’ and a ‘darkly reflective expression quite foreign to her face’ (ibid.: 23). Patricia Yaeger’s observation regarding Edna Pontellier of Kate Chopin’s 1899 novella, *The Awakening*, can be applied here. Yaeger states that while the novel focuses on ‘sexual discovery’ and critiques ‘the asymmetries of the marriage plot’ it must also be recognized as a novel ‘in which the heroine’s capacities for thought are shut down’ (1993: 316). Similarly, in *Aurora Floyd* it may be argued that the heroine is thwarted and censored by the men in the novel. Aurora’s ‘future belongs to [her] husband’ as Bulstrode reminds her (AF: 304), and as Tromp notes, for ‘the last three chapters– nearly eighty pages of the narrative – we hear her voice in the text no more’ (2000: 150). Aurora is to some extent then constructed as a hand-puppet, defined by her ventriloquist husband. As Helen Davies suggests, by ‘emphasising the gendering of the ‘dummy’ role, Braddon demarcates Aurora as an object to be manoeuvred and given speech by others (2012: 11). I would argue that this may be the very point that Braddon is trying to expose. What the novel shows us is that women had little voice and were ruled by their fathers and husbands, leaving them restricted and trapped.

Modern readers are often confused by the ending of *Aurora Floyd*. Braddon gives the text a traditional ‘happily-ever-after’ ending in which Aurora and Mellish are joined in matrimony once more. By ending the novel in this way, the author appears to suggest that the ultimate goal of women is marriage and the best place for them is in the home, fettered to a man. This could be argued as a regression on the author’s part. In response to this, it must be remembered that the prospect of a woman becoming the property of her husband, a ‘femme-covert’ whose identity was thereby fused with that of her husband, did not deter many women from becoming wives (Perkin, 1989: 2). Marriage was still considered the ideal goal for most women, and this is reflected in the many contemporary novels that concluded in this way. Whilst some found marriage stifling and frustrating,

many found it reassuring and safe (ibid.: 3, 7). Though it appears to be a step back for the author, especially in consideration of the femme-covert legal position, marriage could in fact be extremely advantageous. As Deborah Gorham points out, the position of a middle class woman in the nineteenth century could only be advanced by her link to a man, as only a man could acquire status. Work was considered improper for middle class women, and so without a man to advance her, a woman's position would remain stagnant (1982: 8). Aurora marries Mellish for a second time because, it could be argued, she understands that it is the only way to increase her social standing. The prospect of remaining a spinster, especially a fallen one, could be 'bleak' (ibid.: 27), which leads Peter Brooks to argue that Aurora marries Mellish 'to satisfy her primary purpose of social and economic advancement' (1976: 18).

It was in Aurora's own interest to improve her financial future, and the narrator remarks that 'the domain over which Aurora found herself empress was no inconsiderable one' (*AF*: 121). Already an heiress to her own fortune due to equity laws, as a married woman Aurora would become especially wealthy, and with this wealth, particularly autonomous. She could lead a much more independent, unshackled life, visit friends and relatives, travel, implement patronage and control domestic workers within the family home and if she was very smart control the purse-strings (Perkin, 1989: 76-77).

Viewing Aurora's marriage as a regression therefore is to ignore the historical context of the novel and the alternatives faced by these women. At the close of the novel, Aurora is 'a little changed, a shade less defiantly bright, but unspeakably beautiful and tender' (*AF*: 384). This echoes Monique Wittig's argument that 'one can become someone in spite of oppression, that one has one's own identity' (1992: 16). Aurora is innocent of the crime of murdering Conyers and is granted the same opportunity for love and happiness as an untainted woman. She is not the monster that the patriarchal social order illustrates but neither is she the angel that Mellish imagined. Tatum is of the opinion that Braddon deliberately partakes in the 'Symbolic order's abjection of female sexuality' in order to reveal the fatal woman as a 'masculine construction' even

though the ending might appear to support patriarchal paradigms (2007: 523). What Braddon does is show that women are in fact defined and judged through the patriarchal metaphor described by Lacan (see Chapter One above), even though the woman behind the image is quite different. It is only at the novel's conclusion that Aurora is able to become 'properly unsymbolic, to represent only herself' in view of the fact that her secret and supposed identity have been destroyed (Tatum, 2007: 523). Indeed, seated by her husband, the narrator remarks that the 'dark wall that had divided them was shattered' (AF: 305). Although deleted from the single-volume version, a copy of the earlier Tinsley Brothers' three-volume edition of *Aurora Floyd* states that Aurora now arose in happiness and 'intense relief [...] from the bonds' that she had been chained by (1998: 449). Rather than constrain her, the revelation of Aurora's secret set her free and enabled her to commence a new life. This recurring struggle for an unshackled, independent, female identity is a constant theme in the nineteenth-century woman's novel, including Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), to which I now turn.

Chapter Four

‘The Soul That Dares and Defies’: Motherhood, Sexual Autonomy and Romantic Transcendence in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899)

The best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences. Love of home, children, and domestic duties, are the only passions they feel. (Acton, 1867: 145)

Edna Pontellier, the heroine of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) is led by her sexual desires to reject what Adrienne Rich calls the ‘institution’ of motherhood, that is, the patriarchal constructed notion of mothering, as opposed to the actual experience of it (1986: 14). In doing so, Edna’s personal development and sexuality allow her to challenge the boundaries of female propriety and to move towards self-autonomy and self-fulfilment. The novelist, short story writer, essayist and reviewer, Kate Chopin, was born Catherine O’Flaherty in 1850, to a French Creole mother and Irish father in St Louis, Missouri (Martin, 1988: 1, 2). Her father died when she was five, and she was subsequently raised in a matriarchal environment by the widows of the family: her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. Her world was a woman’s world, which meant that she was able to evade many of the traditional gender restraints of the time (Toth, 1999: 9, 34). She was especially fond of her grandmother, who told her compelling and sometimes scandalous tales of real Creole women (Martin, 1988: 2). Madame Charleville taught her grand-daughter important life lessons about ‘greed’, ‘lust’ and ‘maternal love’, but most of all, about the necessity of female independence (Toth, 1999: 15).

At the age of twenty, Kate married Oscar Chopin. The couple moved to New Orleans for nine years and Kate gave birth to five children (Martin, 1988: 2) but she became the talk of the town when she relocated (whilst pregnant with her sixth child), to the small town of Cloutierville with Oscar and their children (Toth, 1994: 117). There she pursued a deliberately scandalous lifestyle, smoking Cuban

cigarettes in public and displaying too much ankle to the local townsfolk, a freedom she had indulged in whilst on honeymoon with Oscar, where she learnt to drink beer and walk around unchaperoned (ibid.: 116-117). Chopin was only thirty three when Oscar died from ‘swamp fever’ (ibid.: 117). Like her maternal ancestors, she never remarried, although there has been speculation about an illicit affair with an Albert Sampite (Toth, 1999: 95-98; Stein, 2005: 4). In 1884, Chopin returned to St Louis with her children to be with her dying mother (Toth, 1994:117). Her first story, ‘Wiser than God’ was published in 1889, and was well received. It was followed by two collections which gained her further acclaim. She was featured in magazines, held soirées with other prestigious writers, and was popular among journalists, editors and poets (ibid.). In 1890 she published her first novel, *At Fault*, which concerned itself with female autonomy, but while Chopin may have identified with the ‘New Woman’, she was never active in the women’s movement and it was never her intention to create a ‘didactic feminist novel’ of any sort (Showalter, 1991: 71). Thus, by the time she had published *The Awakening*, Chopin was a well-established writer. She died in 1904.

Unfortunately, this story about an unsatisfied wife and mother who finds solace in the arms of other men and commits suicide was greeted with mixed reactions amongst the public and official reviewers in 1899. It was described by some as a ‘remarkable novel’ (*Book News*, 1899, in Culley, 1994: 161) in which ‘complete mastery is apparent on every page’ (*St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 1899, in ibid.: 164), while others called it an ‘essentially vulgar story’ (*Literature* 4, 1899, in ibid.: 168), which was ‘not really worth telling’ (*The Outlook*, 1899, in ibid.: 166) since it was merely that of ‘a selfish, capricious woman’ (*Los Angeles Sunday Times*, 1899, in ibid.: 169), who should have ‘flirted less and looked after her children more’ (*The Nation*, 1899, in ibid.: 173).

The Awakening tells the story of Edna Pontellier, the young wife of a rich businessman, Léonce Pontellier, and the mother of two boys. The novel begins at the resort of Grand Isle where she and her family are on holiday. During her stay, she becomes attached to a man named Robert Lebrun, and begins an unlikely friendship with Mademoiselle Reisz, as well as forging a strong friendship with

Mrs Adèle Ratignolle, all of whom awaken unknown, yet ardent feelings within Edna. Robert abruptly departs for Mexico before he and Edna can express their love and, after the trip, Edna and her family return to their home in New Orleans. As the narrative advances, it becomes clear that Edna seeks something more than her allotted role as wife and mother. The summer has had an indelible effect on her and she begins to search for ways to please herself. Her comportment alters; she begins to paint; and she shirks her expected womanly and maternal duties and responsibilities. She continues to visit Mademoiselle Reisz and Madame Ratignolle but also begins a sexual affair with a young man named Alcée Arobin. She subsequently moves into a small cottage, abandoning her husband and children, and survives with the profits of her artwork. However, she is unable to disregard her feelings for Robert and when he returns from Mexico, they confess their love for each other. At the moment when they might have physically consummated their passion, Edna is called away to assist her friend Madame Ratignolle in childbirth. Upon her return she finds that Robert has left her for good. She decides to revisit the waters of Grand Isle and swims out to sea, apparently to drown.

The novel was written with the context of the American women's movement which was, of course, slightly different to the English movement. Although both were driven by similar social and cultural factors, each movement advanced at a different pace and had a distinctive focus (Bolt, 1993: 4, 5). Capitalism and industrialization for example, developed quicker in Britain, and class divisions were more prominent and more complicated, thus a British feminist movement emerged that concentrated more on class issues and on the promotion of employment equality, trade unions and labour (ibid.: 12, 40). America had experienced a Revolution (1765-1783), and a Civil War (1861-1865) and racial and ethnic tensions were greater than in Britain with the anti-slavery movement playing an enormous role in the American feminist conscience (Bolt, 1993: 45). The American women's movement therefore, tended to focus more attention on ethnic and racial differences, but also on the ideology of the family and women's domesticity, which had been promoted and adopted to a greater extent in America (Banks, 1986: 85-86). *The Awakening* undeniably draws

attention to racial and ethnic divisions, from the portrayal of black domestic workers, the distinctive Creole customs in the south, the reference to Mexico and the young Mariequita. Furthermore, Edna deviates from the traditional path of virtue circumscribed for privileged white women, which disrupts the 'sexual-caste mythology' of nineteenth-century Americans who defined the strength of a woman's sexual desire by her skin tone (Elfenbein, 1994, 292-293). The subject of domesticity and motherhood; the focus of this chapter, is equally prominent and revealed right at the start of the novel.

When we first meet Edna, she is an established subordinate wife dominated by her Creole husband's authority. This is clear when Léonce returns from his club one night and insists that his son has a fever. He has no knowledge of Edna's diligence towards her children as he has been absent all evening but his insistence insinuates that Edna has failed 'in her duty toward their children' (A: 10). Edna is reduced to inexplicable tears and feelings of worthlessness although 'she could not have told why' (A: 8). The contemporary definition of a good wife and mother in nineteenth-century American society involved prioritising the husband and child's needs above everything else, including the self. As Ann Oakley points out, this 'condition' of motherhood ultimately leads to women's vulnerability, since mothers are continually required to put themselves last, guaranteeing 'covertness of conflict' within the male culture, in that 'the strength of women's connection to their children is also their weakness' (1980: 268). Motherhood is perceived as an accepted fact of womanhood which always sacrifices the self for the child. Ideas about motherhood are approved and controlled by the ruling male hegemony who essentially dictate what those ideas are. By connecting motherhood and sacrifice to the patriarchal order, women are socially programmed to believe that putting themselves first would be deviant and selfish. As Rich suggests,

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men - by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. (Rich, 1986: 57)

Edna cannot explain the reason for her tears because no true name or description exists to describe a woman's deepest emotions (Griffin-Wolff, 2000: 387). It was not an accepted custom for women to dwell on themselves. The mood that Edna experiences when she begins to cry after Léonce's reproach might be seen as a precursor to Betty Friedan's 'problem that has no name', that 'strange stirring [and] a sense of dissatisfaction' in relation to women's predetermined domestic roles (1965: 13). Edna understands it as an 'indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness' and 'filled her whole being with a vague anguish [...] like a shadow, like a mist passing across her summer's day' (A: 8). According to Friedan, the problem, which she calls 'the feminine mystique' has become tacitly suppressed in the psyche of American women for many years and as a result has crippled women who have relentlessly pursued, and sincerely viewed marriage and motherhood as the apex of feminine fulfilment (Friedan, 1965: 13, 24). Edna's anger is internalized, which in effect leads to extreme 'depression', since there exists no protocol, nor recognized convention for guiding or supporting self-assertive women (Martin, 1988: 23). The ideology of patriarchal motherhood is a method of socially controlling women by ensuring that their own identity remains a mystery. As Edna herself puts it, 'One of these days [...] I'm going to [...] try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don't know' (A: 91). She certainly admires Adèle Ratignolle, the pregnant mother of three whom she considers the 'embodiment of every womanly grace and charm' (A: 10). Adèle is the quintessential good mother, who could only be described as the 'bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams' (ibid.). This is what Edna, according to prevailing norms, should be. On the contrary, however, she is 'not a mother-woman' and does not possess the necessary protective 'wings' of the 'mother-women' which flutter and extend to embrace their children when serious harm looms (A: 10).

At the time Chopin was writing, motherhood was perceived as the only natural and enjoyable experience in which women should gain complete satisfaction. Contemporaries thought that 'women lacking the instinct [to mother]' were as rare and unnatural as 'calves born with two heads' (Bisland, 1895: 753).

Edna is not an ‘angel’ who idolizes her children and her life does not revolve around them (A: 10). She is only impulsively fond of her children, ‘sometimes gather[ing] them passionately to her heart’ yet also ‘sometimes forget[ting] them’ (A: 21). Adèle, the ‘sensuous Madonna’ is Edna’s polar opposite, whom Edna attempts to paint, albeit unsuccessfully (A: 14). While Adèle sits ‘with the gleam of the fading day enriching her splendid color’ Edna is preoccupied with her own integrity as a woman (ibid.). Essentially, the attempt to paint Adèle reveals, as Toth suggests, a desire to sketch out Edna’s yearning for independence, but also exposes the emergence and frustration of Edna’s domestic and religious situation together with her emerging sensuality (1992: 63). Essentially Edna is portrayed as an ‘inadequate’ mother (Rich, 1986: 237), in comparison to the ‘inimitability of the Virgin-Mother model’ (Daly, 1985: 81), which, as Julia Kristeva notes, is, ‘enough to make any woman suffer and any man dream’ (1986: 107). Mary Daly’s observations regarding the imposed goodness and integrity of women in relation to the Madonna is most apposite here:

There is a special aura of glorification of the ideal, as symbolized in [the Virgin] Mary, for example. This impossible ideal has a punitive function, since, of course, no woman can really live “up” to it [...] It throws all women back into the status of Eve and essentially reinforces the universality of women’s low caste status. (Daly, 1985: 62)

Men had the opportunity to escape their roles as fathers and achieve satisfaction through employment (and of course, with the prostitutes at a multitude of brothels) but women were not allowed an outlet. Their domestic and sexual lives became their work and there was never any escape, however temporary, from this role or environment. Edna’s memory of the time her children spent a summer with their grandmother in Iberville was that ‘their absence was a sort of relief’ which ‘free[d] her of responsibility’ (A: 22). Evidently, Edna tries to take advantage of every opportunity to offload her children on to others which would then free her to pursue her own interests. Since all Léonce’s time is consumed with business matters, among other things, he concurs with the status quo, believing that, ‘if it was not a mother’s place to look after children, whose on earth was it?’ (A: 8).

One of the reasons for the lionisation of the mother as a Madonna figure was the idea that women could atone for any unnatural sexual urges through the wholesomeness and purity of motherhood, since these feelings could be repressed (Bland, 1995: 49). Female sexuality became deeply perplexing and was displaced by ‘fettering [a woman’s] carnal desires to the production of babies’ (Griffin-Wolff, 2000: 382, 385). This is most evident in Adèle, who is continually pregnant and forever talking about her ‘condition’ to the point of describing intimate, yet clearly acceptable, details of her ‘accouchements’ (confinements) to men (A: 11). This was an immense contradiction for women as any pleasure from the sexual act itself was thoroughly disapproved of. Women were only encouraged to show interest in the end result, pregnancy, which meant that they could be controlled and defined through motherhood. Chopin appears to portray the role of motherhood as a dangerous construction by the male hierarchy, which would otherwise ensure compliance and female subordination. Doctor Mandalay for example, comments upon the ‘illusions’ of ‘youth’ as a ‘provision of Nature’, a ‘decoy to secure mothers for the race’ which ‘we feel obliged to maintain at any cost’ (A: 123). This point coincides with Rich’s assertion that within the patriarchy, it is women’s affliction and asceticism that is obliged to take precedence ‘for the furtherance of the species’, and that females should refrain from enquiry and enlightenment (1986: 43). In short, women should feel replete by their roles and should not seek for further nourishment.

The rejection of Edna’s maternal ‘nature’ conveys the message that, in comparison to other mothers, she is lacking and deficient. Indeed, Pamela Knights argues that the novel persistently identifies Edna in terms of ‘limit and lack’ and presents her as constantly seeking fulfilment with images and possessions such as art, music, a dinner party, food, and a lover as a way of compensating her for her misery and emptiness (2000: xl). This need to satiate the vacancy inside her, to make a connection or attachment with something meaningful, seems to echo Alan Eppel’s assertion that, essentially, life is ‘a search for re-attachment, perhaps for reunion with the object of our first love’ (2009: 12). This last point will be explored later in connection with Edna’s suicide, but for the moment it can be noted that Edna is ‘defined by negations’ (Giorcelli, 1998: 118).

This identification of what Edna is not, rather than what she is, is used to highlight Edna's Otherness as a mother (Heilmann, 2000: 142), and expose the discontent in her domestic role; she is not maternal, and 'not one of us', is not a 'painter', she is not at home to receive callers, is not the possessor of the home nor the money which maintains it, and she is 'not free' to belong to Robert (A: 23, 64, 89).

David Steinberg notes that as members of a puritanical culture which loves reason we are educated from birth to control ourselves and stifle any feelings, especially erotic feelings, which lead to pleasure, as they might lead to chaos and moral panic (1992: xvii – xviii). He argues that a 'loss of ego boundaries, dissolution of the discrete, discernible self – a core component of deep sexual experience – is perceived not as an emotional, spiritual, or even religious opportunity, but as something to be feared and resisted' (ibid.). The loss of self control is viewed negatively, since individuals are not shown how to lose control 'skilfully, intentionally, artfully' (ibid.). As such, we experience it unconsciously or rebelliously and our desires are seen as suspicious, dark and precarious (ibid.). During Edna's self-discovery, the voice within her is aroused by the sea but, as she is unable to swim, the dark waters are described as 'abysses of solitude' (A: 16). The seductive call of the ocean may indeed invite Edna's soul to 'lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation' with its whispers and murmurs (A: 16), but it also generates frightening uncertainty, in a seduction that is 'thrilling but perilous' (Martin, 1988: 20). The 'deep tangle of the garden' with its 'dusky and torturous outlines of flowers and foliage' (A: 58), similarly serves to portray the restraints and trusses which hold Edna captive to a life of control which has been defined and prescribed by men, unacquainted with the true nature of women. Edna's attempt to free herself by attempting to damage her ring is futile; the hurling and stamping demonstrates how she refuses to subsist as one of her husband's possessions, yet cannot break the bonds of marriage.

Léonce may have been regarded by Edna's women friends as, 'the best husband in the world', one who sends his wife presents of sweet delicacies (A: 9), but we can assume, however, that Edna and her husband do not maintain sexual relations, since there has never existed a 'trace of passion or excessive and

fictitious warmth' on Edna's behalf (A: 21). Their lack of sexual intimacy is confirmed by her husband, who tells the doctor, hoping he 'understand[s]' the meaning, that 'we meet in the morning at the breakfast table' (A: 73). Edna had merely accepted Léonce as her husband out of rebellion and because of his 'absolute devotion' which 'flattered her' (A: 21). The extent of their sexual relationship, at least for Edna, has been for the procreation of children. She therefore lives a way of life that she is not really good at but also, one that she does not really care for; she is intellectually, socially and sexually restricted.

Although she is only just learning to understand herself, Edna truly believes that to sacrifice her identity as a woman would be a complete self-betrayal: 'I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself' (A: 53). Nonetheless, there is intense conflict between 'self-sacrifice' and 'self-realization' for Edna (Martin: 1988: 20). Per Seyersted describes the tyranny Edna is up against when she irrevocably takes the step forward towards self-assertion:

The moment she [woman] feels it more important to be an individual than to be a woman (or at least a mother–woman) as Edna does, she is in deep water. Unassisted, she has to create her own role and status and define her aims; she must fight society's opposition as well as her own feelings of insecurity and guilt, and – more than a man – she suffers under the liberty in which she must justify her existence. (1969: 149)

The daunting light of realisation which would overtake Edna from the darkness of her 'shadowy anguish' was initially 'vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing' (A: 16). Baker-Miller posits that the acknowledgment of one's 'weaknesses and limitations' is absolutely essential to one's psychological growth and is an indefinite development procedure. New pathways would remain undiscovered, she claims, unless women experienced all those vulnerabilities as fundamental learning blocks (1991: 31). In essence, Edna must experience and recognize her oppression if she is to try and rise above it.

Edna's sexual awakening manifests itself through a number of key motifs throughout the novel: sleeping, waking, music, animals and, most specifically, the sea. These are all intertwined with the theme of self-assertion and self-discovery (Showalter, 1991:72). Interestingly it is not by Robert that Edna is awakened but

by two women (ibid.: 74). Edna has a 'sensuous susceptibility to beauty' and is bedazzled by the divine Adèle, whom she liked to 'sit and gaze at' (A: 16, 13). As they sit together in silence, Edna's attentions turn to the 'delicious' sight of the sea and 'the hot wind beating in [her] face' (ibid.: 19). The sensuality of this scene enables Edna to connect with her past, reminiscing on past lovers and her accidental marriage to Léonce. Her senses alive, she leans in close towards Adèle, 'clasping' and 'stroking' her hand when it is offered (ibid.: 19-20), stirring an intense curiosity in her.

Mademoiselle Reisz, the unmarried cynic who lives alone, is shunned by society as she does not conform to its expectations. Despite this or - perhaps because of it – she seems to 'reach Edna's spirit and set it free' (ibid.: 87). Her piano playing arouses profound 'passions' within Edna's soul (ibid.: 29). Significantly, Edna is cautioned against stumbling at Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment as 'the stairs and landings are dark', a symbolic allusion to Edna's new existential dilemma (ibid.: 71). Unmarried and independent women like Mademoiselle Reisz were despised as the deviant Other, much more so than prostitutes or nymphomaniacs (who could be controlled through brothels and asylums) as they refused to be confined by the male hierarchy (Heilmann, 2000: 91). Chopin includes Mademoiselle Reisz as a direct foil to Adèle Ratignolle but, more importantly, both play an important role in shaping Edna's 'metaphorically divine sexuality' since they both provide the signposts of fated womanhood at the crossroads of Edna's newly encountered path in the undiscovered terrain of freedom and eroticism (Gilbert and Gubar, 1989: 102). Edna will either renounce her revolt against society, return to Léonce as a loving, obedient wife and conceive more children as Adèle does, or she will take the route of Mademoiselle Reisz and sacrifice beauty, youth, and family for a life of celibacy, cynicism, and indeed everything except her 'art and pride' (Showalter, 1991: 76). However, Edna has already begun 'to realize her position in the universe as a human being', and 'to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that [had] always enveloped her' (A: 16). Significantly, when Dr Mandelet tells a story of 'the waning of a woman's love, seeking strange, new channels, only to return to its legitimate source after

days of fierce unrest', it 'did not seem especially to impress Edna. She had one of her own to tell, of a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back' (ibid.: 78). Dr Mandelet's story seems to suggest that a woman's pursuit of illicit romance or sexual stimulation as a result of dwindling spousal love, will only lead to chaos but that she will ultimately return to her life with her husband, where, it is naturally assumed, stability and tranquillity await her. Edna however, does not follow this supposition and finds serenity and contentment elsewhere.

Gilbert and Gubar make a case for Edna Pontellier as 'Aphrodite', and they see the text as a feminist revision of the myth of the divine Goddess (1989: 110, 96). The moment Edna enters the sea, at 'that mystic hour and under the mystic moon' (A: 30), she is immersed in exquisite sensations which serve to arouse her and lead to her 'unutterable longing' for Robert Lebrun (Griffin-Wolff, 2000: 376). Music is heard in the distance, the erotically charged 'heavy perfume of white blossom' lingers, and the 'white light of the moon [has] fallen upon the world' (A: 31). Swimming unaided for the first time, this 'quasi mythic character' leaves behind the serpent-like foamy crests which would formerly have held her captive at shore (Gilbert and Gubar, 1989: 107). She suddenly feels that 'some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body' (A: 31). Edna relishes the freedom of this moment and the sense of autonomy 'intoxicate[s]' her. She wants to venture out 'where no woman had swum before' (ibid.), a clearly symbolic statement. Immersed in the 'otherness' of this 'baptismal embrace', Edna is 'renewed, reborn' and never the same again (Gilbert and Gubar, 1989: 103). As Edna herself notes, 'she herself - her present self - was in some way different from the other self' (A: 45).

Later, at the house, Edna watches Robert closely in the 'strips of moonlight' but the two of them do not speak and Edna's sexual tension mounts. In this silence, 'the first-felt throbbings of desire' toward Robert are born (ibid.: 34). Her 'mythic metamorphosis' into Aphrodite now allows her to see Robert in a new light (Gilbert and Gubar, 1989: 106). Rather than seeing him as simply a 'gentle, almost feminised man', Edna is now able to marry her sentimental and

erotic feelings together (Knights, 2000: xl). Her emotional and sexual selves are now in tune with each other and she feels she has been in a 'delicious, grotesque, impossible dream' when she begins to wake up (A: 36). Accordingly, she now feels strong enough to refuse her husband's command to go to bed, and tells him: 'I don't wish to go in, and I don't intend to. Don't speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you' (ibid.: 35). In short, she begins to possess 'the courageous soul' with the power to do anything, '[t]he brave soul. The soul that dares and defies' as defined by Mademoiselle Reisz (ibid.: 71).

Edna's pleasure-seeking takes on a more masculine form; she stays out late, begins to gamble and drinks 'liquor from the glass as a man would have done' (ibid.: 87). This exemplifies Judith Butler's argument that women's identities are not fixed. The only trajectory society has allowed for the experiencing of erotic desire is through man, but Edna kisses Robert first when he returns, a prerogative usually reserved for men. Furthermore she says to him: 'I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly; but I have got into a habit of expressing myself' (ibid.: 117). This appropriation of male behaviour gives Edna a large amount of freedom to determine the type of woman she could develop into.

Edna's sexuality has, according to Showalter, a strong, 'self-contained, almost masturbatory' characteristic (1991: 72-73). By way of example, both Edna and Robert 'stroke' the soft 'silky fur' of a 'slumbering' cat and there is reference to Edna as 'a sleek animal waking up in the sun' (A: 116, 118, 78). On another occasion Edna caresses her hair, and stretches and rubs her body, 'as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh' (ibid.: 41). This is undoubtedly an immensely sexualised word picture (Pykett, 1992: 100). Edna has also become acutely attentive to the corporeal forms of other people who surround her, who seem to stir her soul. When she visits Adèle, for example, she finds her looking 'more beautiful than ever there at home, in a negligee which left her arms almost wholly bare and exposed the rich, melting

curves of her white throat' (A: 61). While Edna does not desire Adèle, she is able to admire the aesthetics of the female body and look upon it without any self-reproach or shame, which awakens her own inner sensuality.

Edna's desires are not brought to fruition until she befriends Alcée at the races one evening, a night which leaves her 'restless and excited' (A: 83). Alcée exudes an aura that Edna is attracted to, one that is unrestrained, unlike Robert's, and brings out her 'animalism' in a way she has never known (ibid.: 87). She feels she is in command of the situation, much like the heroine from *Fantomina*, as there are very few emotions involved. His kiss was 'a flaming torch that kindled desire', and 'his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her' (ibid.: 92, 86). She knows he is willing to carry out the deed that Robert had not the courage to do. With Alcée, Edna hopes to lose herself completely, to enjoy sex as men do, who, according to Anaïs Nin, are able to separate emotions and sensuality from the lovemaking act (1992: 117), and, as Steinberg suggests, to transform the erotic world that has awakened her 'from a frightening territory of demons to an exciting realm of personal exploration and personal fulfilment' (1992: xxi).

Thus, forgetting Léonce completely, she proceeds with her sexual adventure, portraying 'her autonomy by making it available to a rival male, asserting her right to award or withhold sexual favours' (Baker, 1989: 92-93). This is the only thing she can do to achieve autonomy; as Friedan asserts, 'sex is the only frontier open to women who have always lived within the confines of the feminine mystique' (Friedan, 1965: 228). Since Edna's feelings for Alcée are carnal, her liberty is not compromised. He confesses, albeit deceptively: 'You see, I go when you command me. If you wish me to stay away, I shall do so. If you let me come back, I – oh! you will let me come back?' (A: 85). He needn't have begged so, for Edna was simply waiting for 'something to happen – something, anything; she did not know what' (ibid.: 83). As Baker points out, for a woman who is 'powerlessness in a masculine world, it is indeed tempting to set that world at odds by subverting the patriarchal order through infidelity' (1989: 92-93). By

engaging in loveless, liberated and undemanding sex with Alcée, she experiences the pleasures of the body, the pure animal lust that drives her and is finally able to experience her authentic, free, passionate, and erotic self (Praver, 2006: 26).

After she makes love with Alcée, Edna's awakening takes a different turn. She 'cried a little that night after Alcée left her' and suddenly she is confronted with the reality of the situation: 'there was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips' (A: 92, 93). Edna's sexual escapade with Alcée is, in reality, a purely perfunctory act, and although she feels no remorse, she realizes that behind the illusion there is nothing but emptiness and that she cannot connect with Alcée on a higher level. It is a pointless endeavour and cannot compare to the emotional attachment she has made with Robert. Edna desires more than just the physical act. As Nin suggests, the separation of love from the sexual act 'diminishes pleasure and reduces the heightened quality of lovemaking. For lovemaking is enhanced, heightened, intensified by its emotional content' (1992: 117).

The realization that Edna does not love Alcée is exhibited in her nonchalance towards him. This is apparent after the dinner party where she is deliberately unresponsive to him when he kisses her shoulder, hoping for something more. She wishes to go to sleep and has no intention of engaging in sexual intercourse with him. While Edna initially envisions a blithely erotic encounter with Alcée, in her heart she has subscribed to an 'idealized model of romantic transcendence' which she believes only Robert can fill (Kearns, 1991: 63). Her developing, erotic self, a symbol of her female identity is ignited through the combination of erotic sensations she experiences, but the higher she gets to this sexual transcendence, the more clearly she understands her doomed fate within the system (ibid.), a patriarchal system that, according to Kate Millet, is obfuscated through the notion of romantic love (1977: 36-37). She argues that 'patriarchy has been much softened by the concepts of courtly and romantic love' and males are able to exploit the only reason given for female sexual activity through 'emotional manipulation' (ibid.). To quote Joan Williams, marriage and

motherhood binds 'women's marginalization with their aspirations for romantic love in a culture that treats love as a key source of meaning in life' (2000: 246). Edna is trapped and unable to gain total independence from her circumscribed position because she is compelled by the rules of love and marriage, the latter being what Joyce Nicholls claims to be the 'greatest confidence trick that man has ever played on woman' (1975: 43-44).

Edna, it could be argued, remains enslaved in a role which society encourages for women through heterosexual affection. She is therefore imprisoned by a love which disguises itself as female liberty, as it impairs her autonomy and is 'a masochistic exercise in negative capability' (Martin, 1988: 22-23). Any autonomy it seems to offer is merely illusory and this is what Chopin appears to be flagging up. The idea that some women place so much effort into being fulfilled by their romantic illusions leaves them searching for something more and perhaps renders them vulnerable when they are disappointed. As Patricia Yaeger suggests, Edna becomes trapped in a complex system 'that has already been negotiated by her society' (Yaeger, 1993: 312). At her dinner party for example, Edna is suddenly engulfed by the 'old ennui', a 'chill breath' of 'hopelessness' and 'acute longing' for 'the beloved one' (A: 98). Kaplan points out that because women's position in the symbolic order is construed as 'lacking', they are portrayed as searching for recognition with children or (more importantly in relation to the point I am making) an 'identity/wholeness' through 'romantic love' (1992: 85).

When Robert returns she is faced with a further disenchantment; he has not sought her out quickly enough, and remains distant, 'nearer to her off there in Mexico' (A: 114). The reality of her imaginary union which she has dreamed about 'a hundred times' is disappointing (ibid.: 108). The 'flesh and blood Robert' 'disenfranchise[s] the more desirable phantom love, whose presence is linked with her more general yearning for suffusion and indefinable ecstasy' (Griffin-Wolff, 1994: 239). It is for this reason that Harold Bloom, in particular, has condemned Edna's desire as narcissistic and, consequently, 'anything but feminist' (2007: 1).

However, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that the novel 'weave[s] a complex pattern of progression and regression in the course of the woman who seeks to escape the institutional context of female life' (1994: 257).

While *The Awakening* can certainly be read as a novel which does not empower Edna because of her propensity to become enslaved by her desires, not unlike the heroines Fantomina, Emma and Aurora, the most controversial aspect is the novel's conclusion. Robert is undoubtedly the person with whom Edna has made her most intimate attachment but this is not necessarily the love she truly craves. The juxtaposition of Robert and Edna's final meeting with Adèle's agonising childbirth serves to emphasize the idea that womanhood and childbirth, pleasure and pain are inextricably linked (Seyersted, 1969: 146). Psychoanalytic theory proposes that all love is an unconscious quest for the maternal love experienced in childhood; a desire to reconnect with the mother figure that provided the infant with its first feelings of love (Eppel, 2009: 17). Griffin-Wolff makes a parallel between Adèle's childbirth and the 'safety of being reincorporated into the safety of pre-existence' which is why Edna abandons Robert and rushes to Adèle's side (1994: 239). Through Adèle, the woman who first awakened her, Edna is able to reconnect to this 'evanescent' condition and recapture the 'sense of oneness' to which men do not have access (ibid.). For Edna, Adèle's childbirth is a complete 're-enactment of her own birth and a brutal re-awakening to the world of the isolated ego' (ibid.). There is, according to Kaplan, 'a desire to re-experience the original illusory oneness with the mother, and embody a desire for merging, for loss of self in Other' (1992: 85). The 'ecstasy of pain', the 'deadened sensation' of the anaesthetic and the 'vague dread' that Edna witnesses at the 'scene of torture' describe a metaphorical death of the old Edna, as well as the memory of her own labour and separation of oneness she experienced with the birth of her own children (A: 122). Throughout the novel, Edna seeks this oneness through sexual intercourse, for, according to Eppel, humans have 'a compelling preoccupation with the need to be in proximity to an attachment figure' which explains the link she feels to Robert (Eppel, 2009: 44). This point may also be appropriated to the previous heroines in this thesis who, like Edna, experience a loneliness or emptiness that cause them to seek,

somewhat futile attachments. When this propinquity is unsuccessful, it will sometimes result in feelings of 'profound despair, depression, loss and abandonment that ultimately may lead to an attempt at suicide' (ibid.).

The pleasure and pain identified within these contrasting scenes can also be associated with Bowlby's attachment theories of love and loss which are associated with the life (eros) and death (thanatos) instincts (ibid.: 86). Drawing from Freudian psychoanalysis, Eppel argues that, 'there is within us, side by side with the impulse to attach, its nemesis, the human capacity for aggression and murder' (ibid.). These two powerful instincts exist concurrently in the human experience and are the fundamental forces behind the struggle of the self (ibid.: ix). However, when the subject loses the love object associated with their chief attachment, the balance between these two instincts is disrupted and the death instinct becomes the stronger of the two which often results in suicide (also referred to as self-murder) (ibid.: 86-87).

Edna's suicide can be read then, as a retreat to the state of infancy which stems from her instinct of self-annihilation (Wolkenfeld, 1994: 243). In the final scene, she is surrounded by signs of female fertility: birds, bees, and most significantly, the 'primal sea', which symbolizes the amniotic fluid 'in which the body and soul are one' (Wolkenfeld, 1994: 244). The memory of her children as 'antagonists' who 'sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days' (A: 127) merely serves to confirm to Edna the impossibility of fusion in this life and she relinquishes herself to the sea (Griffin-Wolff, 1994: 241). Edna walks down to the sea unconsciously, 'not thinking' and, casting away her clothes, she relishes the sensation of 'standing naked in the open air' and feels like a 'new born creature' (A: 127). The subtle urge to 'think of her children' can only be done in terms of renouncing her own motherhood and returning to the union with her mother, recalling the 'blue-grass meadow' from her childhood and her father and sister's voice in the concluding paragraph (ibid.: 127).

As Fox-Genovese points out, the novel may have begun with a masculine-etched domestic space, but it ends with a feminine 'oceanic maternal space that negates the whole world' (1994: 258). It is possible, as Giorcelli argues, that Edna

simply floats and begins a new life elsewhere, having gained her 'precarious, quasi-divine wholeness' (1998: 122). It seems more likely, however, that for Edna to awaken, she must die. She has no choice but to submerge into the sea in order to unchain herself from the bonds of patriarchy and reconnect with nature, for 'out of the deathlike stupor of childbirth comes life' (Treichler, 2000: 271).

Conclusion

This thesis has discussed the ways in which issues of female sexual desire have been represented throughout my four chosen texts. It has also considered the extent to which these novels can be regarded as proto-feminist since each of the authors offers a portrayal of women endeavouring to challenge the boundaries of 'acceptable' female behaviour. The study set out to assess some common themes within the texts. First of all, there is a similar yearning for sexual fulfilment and autonomy in each of the heroines, revealed through their defiance against the social order. Although each text represents women at different ages and phases in a woman's life, and belongs to a distinct historical period and literary genre, the heroines are similarly conflicted between a desire to satisfy their own needs, against what was deemed appropriate by society's standards. None of the heroines is prepared to yield to the conventions of circumscribed womanhood and each one describes her frustrations and disenchantment at her allotted role. Each heroine appropriates 'masculine' qualities at one time or other in a bid to engage in and benefit from the power that comes with this.

A central argument of the thesis has been that myths surrounding female sexuality – such as the female libido, female passivity, the virgin/whore dichotomy and domesticity – are simply male constructed notions that do not correspond to the complex nature of women. Stereotyped female images within the novels, such as those of the prostitute, the stalker, the femme fatale and the adulteress are shown to have been ways of controlling female sexuality. They also highlight cultural fears on a much broader level, such as the threat of disease, foreign invasion and social changes which destabilized the patriarchy.

While there can be no denying the less emancipatory aspects of each novel, the thesis has argued that it is possible to interpret some of the negative aspects as a deliberately covert move on the part of the author. Many of the topics addressed in these novels are ones that have been 'theorized' by modern feminist thinkers who have set out to identify the societal and ideological system by which women are confined, the method in which this system works and the ways in

which women have opposed it. Since it became increasingly impossible for female authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to openly discuss sexual desire, in conforming to conventional literary mores, the authors may have deliberately appeared to support the symbolic order. By doing so, they may have made possible a trajectory for reclaiming their own sexual desires, in their own terms.

The thesis has argued that though the authors of the four novels may have appeared to conform in order to convey various hypocrisies surrounding female sexual desire, in exploring the erotic aspirations of women they open up further uncertainties about the extent in which women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may have been controlled or subjected to limitations in other ways. These include, for example, the relegation of women as sexual objects, the loss of their identity or voice in society and the home, the designation of woman as the Other, pushed to the margins, and the complexities surrounding gender difference and domesticity. Although these authors may not have been able to openly discuss these issues, they brought them to light and increased awareness. In their representation of female sexual desire, each of these authors has contributed something to the long struggle for the liberation of women.

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